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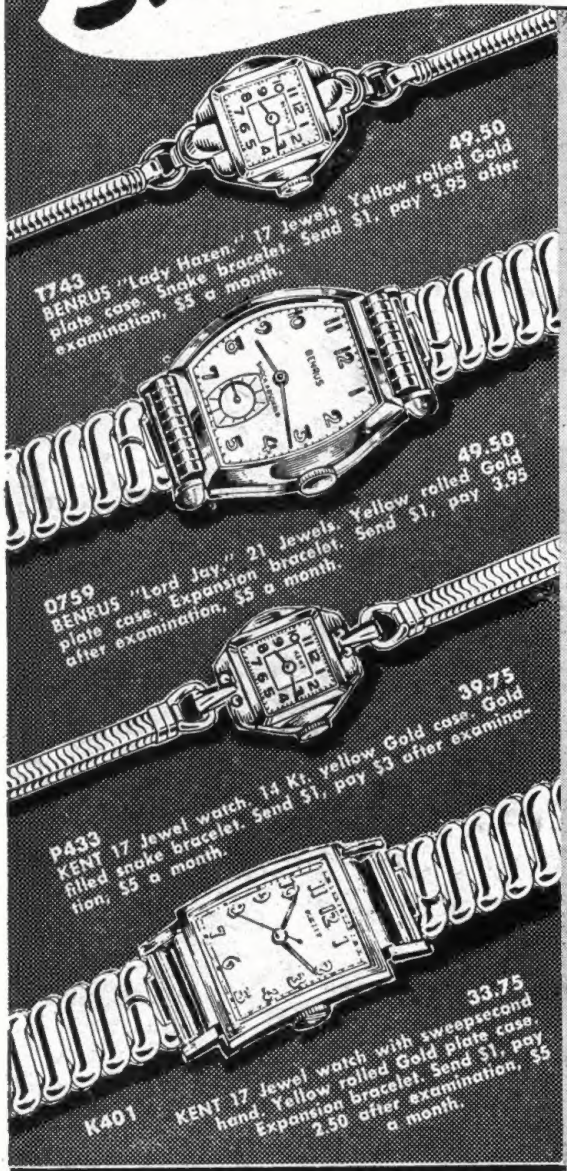

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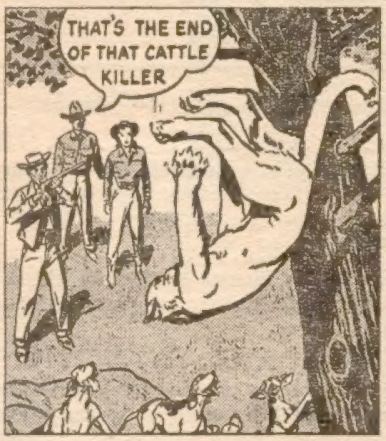

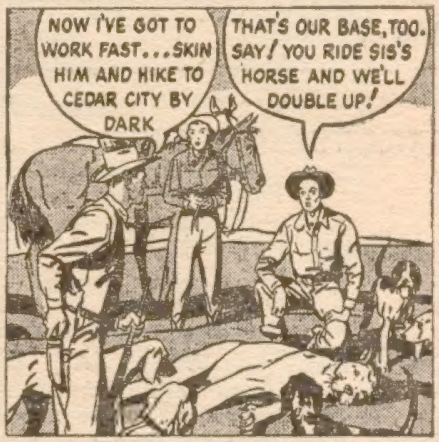

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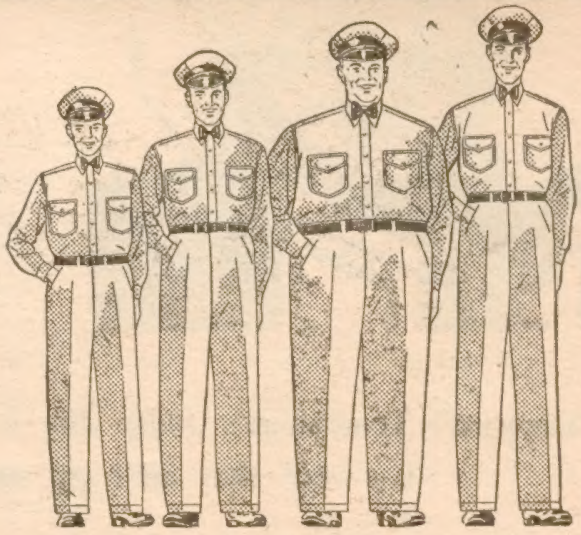

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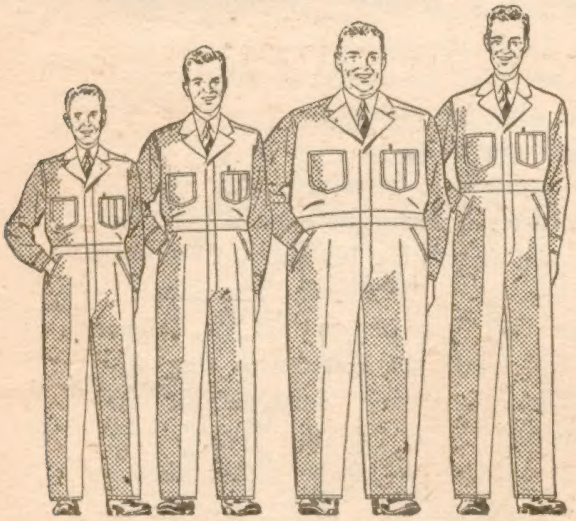

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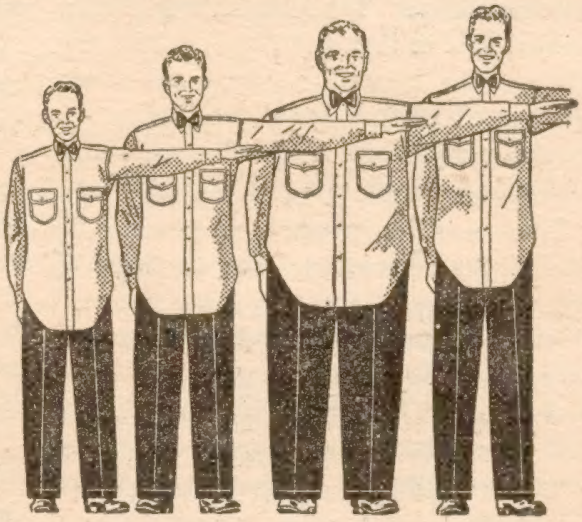

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Boothill for Barristers

By JEB FORD

"Lawyers," Tombstone's Judge Jim Burnett vowed, "may know the law—but they ain't got no flair fer justice!"

JUDGE JIM BURNETT hated lawyers. Always had. "They know the law," he used to say, "but they got no flair for justice." The Judge himself had a decided flair in that direction—in fact, the sentences he handed out from his crude bench at Charleston, ore-processing center for the mining town of Tombstone, had a Biblical, eye-for-an-eye quality about them.

There was, for instance, the penance he selected for a miner who was convicted of claim-jumping. "See this here nugget," he said, shaking a gold lump in the criminal's face. "It's from the mine you stole. And since you're so found o' other people's gold, I sentence you to push this here nugget with the end of yer nose from here to Tucson."

His scorn for the legal mind, dated back to his first term. Gavel in hand, he was about to rap out a stiff sentence for a saloon-keeper convicted of selling poisoned whiskey when the latter's lawyer spoke up.

"You have no jurisdiction in this case!" The legal eagle protested. "Charleston is part of Tombstone and Tombstone has no law to cover the situation."

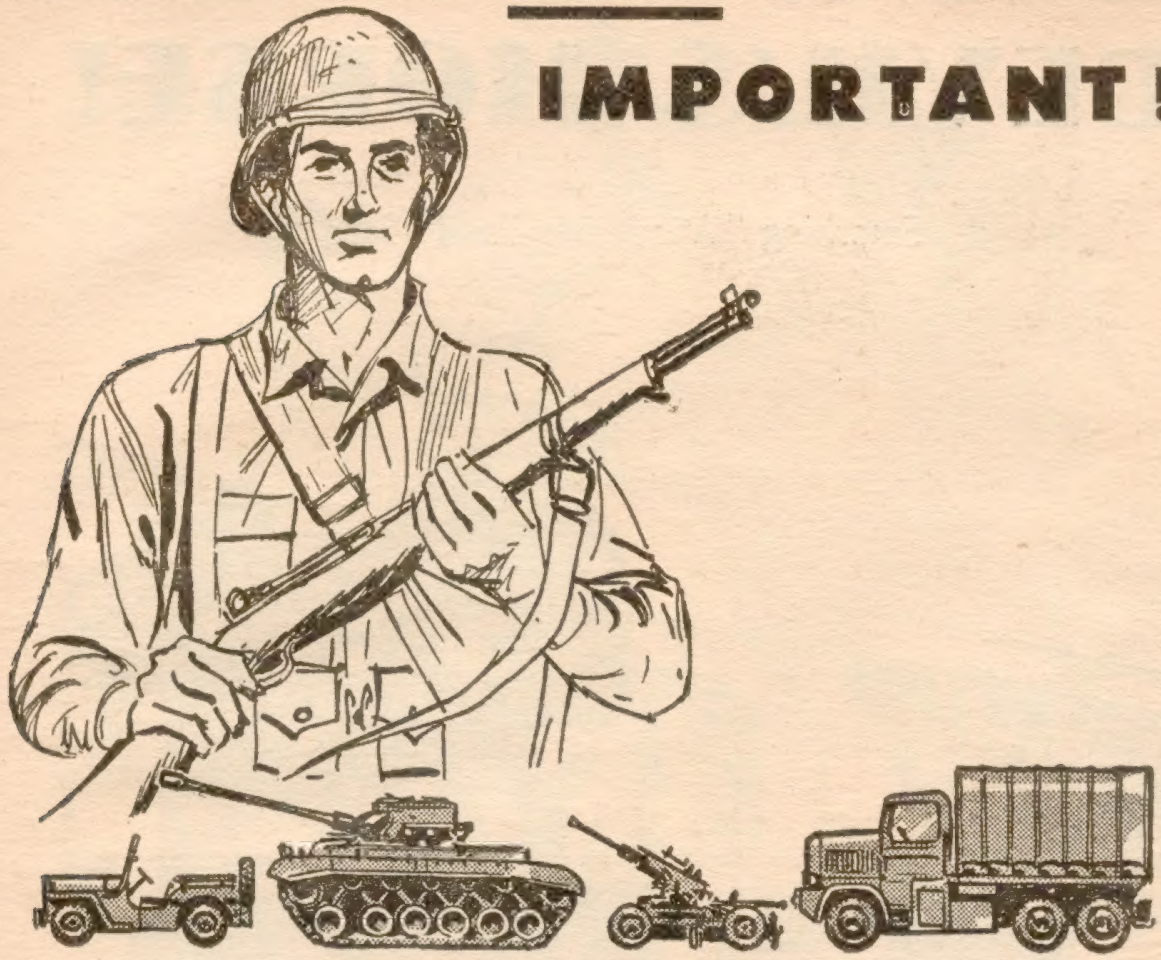
"So," snapped Jim Burnett, unimpressed, "I hereby declare Charleston independent of Tombstone. Yes, and if it's necessary to preserve justice, I'll declare her independent of the Territory and the whole U.S.A. If there's anything I can't stand it's to see justice hampered by laws —or lawyers!" he added, peering intently at the alarmed attorney.

High spot of his personal assault on the legal profession, however, was reached when, after a turbulent trial, a man was convicted of striking his wife on the head with the flat of his shovel. The accused's lawyer had been peppery in his defense and had made the courtroom ring with his "Objection!" and "Reservation!" and "Complaint!" so that the Judge's salty bits of wisdom, which he rather liked to hear himself say, were drowned in the uproar.

"You're guilty, all right," the judge decided. "Guilty as sin. But even if ye are a wife beater, yer not half the menace to society that yer noisy lawyer is!

"Therefore," he went on, chuckling, "I'm going to give you eighteen months at hard labor, but I insist that yer lawyer, since he lost the case, and since I don't like him anyway, should be the one to do the servin'!" And the luckless lawyer had to do just that.

WHERE A MAN IS STILL IMPORTANT!



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RIDE THE DEVIL'S HORSE!

Smashing "Windy McCloud" Saga

Men cleared the street and sought the protection of the porches as they glimpsed him on the horse of the devil.

By THOMAS THOMPSON

"I will give you just ten minutes to vanish on your stolen devil's horse, Señor Windy McCloud," offered El Lobo, king of the Palisades bandidos, "before my men cut you to ribbons. . . . West are cliffs dropping to the Pacific; north is El Diablo, who is almost as blood-thirsty a killer as me. East, the posse, and the 'horse-thief tree' so named for a reason you will learn. Adios, amigo, you are now one free hombre!"

CHAPTER ONE

The Horse from Hell

HE WAS a man born to the saddle, long-legged, loose-jointed, an easiness about him that found its way into his pale blue eyes and his hawkish, homely features. The high-crowned hat he wore was expensive and the half-boots were handmade. He wore a bright red shirt. He sat on a rock at the side of the stage road that wound through the barren hills between Ventura and Cala-

basas, contemplating the holes in his socks and looking bleakly at the runover boots. He wished mightily that he had a horse.

Ventura had seemed such a peaceful place. The mission there on the hill, the blue Pacific bathing the feet of the town. Slow moving paisanos and señoritas with smiles in their eyes. Hot *chili rellenos* and soft guitars. And the doggonedest whiskey it had ever been Windy McCloud's displeasure to drink. He pushed the hat back off his brick-red hair, explored the knot on his head with the tips of his fingers and decided that somewhere along toward morning he must have said the wrong thing to several people. It was a habit of his.

The sun glared against the white dust and seared his eyes. He groaned and started working his swollen and blistered feet back into the boots. He got up, tested his weight, then picked up the apple-horn double-cinch saddle, hefted its weight and wondered whether or not it had been worth it. He glanced at his skinned knuckles and decided it had been. A man had to have something in exchange for a thousand dollars, even if it was only a memory.

Ahead the road twisted up across a grass-brown hill and lost itself in an endless sheet of bright blue sky. To the left was a long valley, rich with grass, and beyond that were the constant brush slopes that stood between here and the ocean. Peaceful country. So peaceful that he wasn't sure until he heard the sixth shot.

He ducked instinctively, for the shots were near. Then when he was sure he was not the target he inched his head out of his shoulders and tried to place the sound. It was coming from one of the dozen lilac-choked canyons that lay like wrinkles in the smoothness of the hills. There was a sound of riders—shouts as if they were driving a herd of horses.

At first there was only the violent agitation of the head-high brush, and then a rider broke out into the open, crouched low in his saddle. There was another rattle of gunfire. The rider seemed to jump free of the leather. He hit the ground and rolled over and over, then crawled away on all fours while the lead from the hidden riflemen cut a spurting pattern around him. The horse ran a hundred yards or so, straight up the valley, stopped and stood there stiff-legged for a minute, and then started cropping grass.

Hoofbeats pounded loudly. There was another exchange of gunfire, and a band of riders cut across the open, visible for less than a minute. They streaked off into one of the many canyons. After that there was dead silence and the country was peaceful again.

Windy had had enough of trouble to last him for awhile, but the more he looked at that horse standing there the more his feet hurt. He waited a good half hour to make sure there'd be no more gun play and still the horse stood there.

Maybe it's hurt, Windy told himself. Better go have a look see.

He started walking slowly and painfully down the slope, carrying his saddle in his left hand, keeping his right hand not too far from the gun that hung at his hip.

NEAR the bottom of the bare slope he paused a while, listening intently. There was no sound except the soft jingle of chain on the grazing horse's bit. The lanky redhead wrinkled his eyes against the sun, wiggled his burning toes in his skin-tight boots, thought of the thousand dollars he lost in Ventura, and made up his mind.

He recognized the horse immediately, for if there was another horse someplace exactly like this one, Windy had never seen it. A big, jug-headed animal, it was an off-shade of buckskin with a black line down his back and two perfect white stockings on its front feet. The amazing

part of the critter was the white patch around its left eye. This horse, once seen, wouldn't be forgotten, Windy caught himself thinking uneasily, and he had seen it before. Last night. It had been ridden by the big jovial Mexican who had relieved Windy of a thousand dollars.

The walk down the slope, the blisters on the Texas drifter's heels, the bust-head whiskey, and the way he had been taken in cards did little for either his temper or his conscience. He salved the latter slightly by removing the saddle that was on the horse and substituting his own. After that he mounted and heaved a huge sigh of relief.

His relief was short-lived. The big jughead stood docile as a bucket-fed calf for a few minutes, then he started to quiver from his Roman nose to his burr thick tail. Windy got the signal just in time to get his feet deep in the stirrups and his rump against the cantle. Then the hybrid buckskin broke in the middle and came together at both ends.

He gave three test crow hops, left the ground with all four feet, came down stiff-legged, bounced around like an over-inspired young kitchen, grabbed the bit in his teeth and started making ever-narrowing circles. Windy lost his hat, then his gun, and he had a feeling that another minute of this and he'd lose his breakfast.

That apple-horn saddle of his would stay on anything that wore hair, he knew, so he glued himself to it, locked his jaws to keep from breaking his teeth off at the gums, yanked in on the reins and invited the big devil to do his best. Five minutes later the horse stopped and stood there with head drooping, lower lip protruding, seemingly half-asleep.

Windy sucked air into his lungs, ran a quivering hand over his throbbing red head and grinned. He dismounted then, slowly, got his gun and his hat and stepped back into the saddle, making the move quickly, keeping tight check on the reins as he did.

But the jug-headed buckskin had had his fun and had no further intention of doing anything. Windy rode back to the road and headed for Calabasas, and he had to prod the brute to keep him in a trot. At the same time there was a remarkable flow of strength in the animal lurking just under his hide. It was the kind of horse that had more bottom than a blue-nose mule and in a pinch he'd deliver the goods and outlast anything on four legs. Windy was satisfied with his purchase. He just wished the crazily marked brute wasn't quite so conspicuous.

The white dust road went up another grass-brown hill, went up in easy loops without effort and found a low smooth pass that lay comfortably in the sunlight. From there the road drifted on down to the bottleneck north end of the long broad San Fernando Valley, and in this bottleneck was the fabled town of Calabasas, the jumping-off place of creation.

In the valley itself the huge Spanish land grants were splitting up, sub-dividing, and the farmers were coming in. Even the Mission was bowing aside to a new era. Here in the upper valley men ran sheep, and men fought and died in disputes over land. But all this was merely a prelude to the ending that was Calabasas.

In this single street town with its self-appointed hangtree, all law came to an end. Less than thirty miles from the civilization that was Los Angeles, Calabasas recognized no law but its own, and that was apt to be a vagrant thing concocted to fit the demands of the moment.

IN BRUSHY rock-sided Topanga Canyon and many breaks of the Malibu hills it was said horse thieves and cutthroats roamed at will. Natives gave them colorful names—El Lobo, El Diablo. Half

wild men who would as soon cut a throat as not. Perhaps it was true that such men lived. Until now no one had gone there to find out. It was a place with a reputation, this Calabasas. There was no way to go from Ventura to Los Angeles without passing through it. Windy McCloud gave it little thought. He had seen towns with reputations before.

But he hardly expected the reception the town gave him. When a town has a reputation for having a couple of men for breakfast each morning it takes a good man to make a stir, and Windy McCloud was definitely doing that. A little girl not over ten years old saw him, gave a scream of terror and went scampering into an adobe hovel. Two boys stared, fascinated, and went backing away. A couple of Mexican laborers bowed and scraped and crossed themselves as if they had seen a vision, then ducked quickly out of sight.

Further into town men cleared the street and sought the protection of the long porches. Windy squinted his eyes thoughtfully, put as stern a look as he could muster on his thin features and was well contented with himself. He had done a pretty good job of working over four men in that saloon in Ventura last night. That big Mexican must have been someone of importance. The news had traveled fast.

Then he started getting snatches of conversation in Spanish, and over and over he heard the phrases, *"El Picaro! Caballo del Diablo!"* Back in Texas Windy had learned Spanish before he had learned English and the phrases left him a little deflated. *The Rascal,* they said. *The Horse of the Devil.* Apparently it was the jug-headed monster he rode that was causing the uproar.

He reined up in front of a saloon, dismounted and tied the beast to a hitchrack. One Mexican took off his hat and stood at a respectful distance. Two men who might have been cowpunchers made it plenty obvious that they were keeping their hands away from their guns. He started toward the saloon and men stumbled over themselves getting out of his way.

He went inside and met a dead silence and a wide space at the bar. He slapped down his lone silver dollar and the bartender's hand was shaking when he set out the bottle. Windy poured a drink, glared at the dozen men who were in the room and saw all but two shrink away from his glance. Then the door opened again and a short stocky hombre not over five-foot-three came swaggering in. The gun on his hip was half as big as the man. The little stranger walked up to Windy, surveyed the six-foot-four frame of the Texan, smacked his lips, nodded contentedly and ordered himself a drink.

The silence grew thicker by the minute and Windy began to get an uneasy feeling along his spine. He poured himself another drink, swished it around in his mouth, swallowed noisily and said, "Sure is quiet hereabouts. You'd think they were getting ready for a funeral."

The little man with the big gun made a wry face over his drink, half turned from the bar and hooked back his tattered vest to expose a lawman's badge. He spoke slowly, deliberately, pursing his lips over his words. He said, "A sage observation, my friend. A funeral is what it will be."

"That so?" said Windy McCloud, feigning a hint of ferociousness. It left the little man untouched. "Whose funeral, might I ask?"

"Since you're riding what was once my horse," the half-pint lawman said, "I reckon the funeral will be yours."

Windy didn't see the little man's hand move, but there was no doubt that the big gun was out of the holster and was prodding solidly against the drifter's middle, and that it meant business.

CHAPTER TWO

He Who Slaps El Lobo

THINGS happened too fast for Windy. Two guns blazed at the back of the room. The half-pint constable turned in that direction and instinct told Windy to clout the lawman a good one alongside the head. He got a glimpse of two Mexicans herding the rest of the onlookers into a corner and he made for the door, his long legs carrying him faster than he had ever thought possible.

There was another blast of gunfire and looking over his shoulder he saw that his two benefactors were perforating the ceiling and holding off any pursuit. Windy gave them his silent thanks, hit the sidewalk, tugged loose the reins and got into the saddle of the grotesque buckskin all in the same movement. As he jerked the animal into the street he saw his two unknown friends backing out of the saloon, still keeping things under control. They turned then, ready to cover his exit from town. He didn't know why, but he was perfectly contented to let things stand as they were. That sawed-off lawman had a mean look about him.

He was practically out of town, riding at a full run, when he turned and saw that the two Mexicans had mounted and were following him. He led them a good mile to where he could pull off the road into a cover of brush and there he waited, relaxed, a grin on his homely face.

The two Mexicans jerked their mounts to a halt in a spurting spray of dust, one on each side of Windy. The Texan said in Spanish, "I don't know why you should befriend me, but I thank you." He extended his hand to the short fat man on his right.

The Mexican smiled broadly, took the proffered hand and gave a quick jerk. Windy, half unseated, clawed for the saddle horn. At that moment the other Mexican stood up in his stirrups, drew his gun and brought the barrel smashing down against the Texan's head. Windy had a pleasant impression of birds singing as he slid out of the saddle. The ground was harder than he had expected.

A long time later the sounds were still there, but they weren't so much like bird songs now. It was more like a big bell tolling away someplace inside Windy's skull. He opened his eyes carefully, wincing against the pain, and found that he was still on the grotesque buckskin.

But now he was crosswise and his hands and feet were tied together under the horse's belly. He could tell by the feeling at his hip that his gun was gone. He closed his eyes again and didn't care much what happened.

Later he heard voices and got the impression that his two captors had come upon a lookout. There was a quick exchange of conversation, startled remarks about El Picaro, the horse that Windy was fast beginning to wish he had never seen.

They went on and they came to a small creek that wound down a narrow corridor between high red cliffs. They followed this for some distance, the horses' hoofs splashing against the water. They stopped then and untied Windy's hands and feet. He slid to the ground and stood leaning against the side of the devil horse.

Looking around finally Windy saw that they were in a small grass-deep meadow completely surrounded by high rock walls, the only entrance being the small stream-cut canyon they had followed in. There were three cabins there and two corrals. In one corral were twenty of the prettiest horses it had ever been Windy's pleasure to see.

THERE was much shouting back and forth and the door of the largest cabin opened. Windy closed his eyes tightly

and shook his head, opened his eyes again and began to worry about whether it was the whiskey he had put away in Ventura or the blow on the head. The man who stood in the doorway of the cabin couldn't be real.

He was short and fat, a Mexican. He had one completely white eye. He wore Cavalry boots shined to an unbelievable brilliance. Windy let his eyes raise to the red and gray striped trousers tucked into those boots, then to the ornate silver-studded belt that carried not a gun but a huge saber. Above the belt was no shirt; only a greasy buckskin vest. Capping it all was a plumed Napoleon hat. The ridiculous figure strode forward as regally as his pudgy legs would permit. He spoke directly to Windy McCloud, his bushy black brows beetling out.

"So," the caricature said. "This is the one who rides El Picaro, the horse of the great Constable Brad Eker." He threw back his head then and roared with laughter as if it were a rare joke. "I thought my friend El Diablo bragged he had stolen the horse!" he choked. He beat his chest with his fist.

"Me, Lobo, the greatest bandit in the Malibus. I steal from under Diablo's nose twenty horses and on the same day a stranger takes from him the most famous horse in Calabasas!" The comic opera figure stopped laughing as suddenly as he had started and the look on his face was not amusing. He stepped forward quickly, thrust his face close to Windy's and said, "Tell me the truth how you get this horse or the dogs will have your heart for supper!"

Something about the man told Windy this was no mere figure of speech. The reputation of these scattered outlaw bands in the Malibu hills was tough enough to keep even the hardiest lawman from coming here. If Windy wanted to lengthen his life span to any appreciable length he would have to do some smooth talking. He had two things to go on at this point. One was that this character here in front of him called himself Lobo. The other was that stealing and riding the horse El Picaro was quite an accomplishment.

Windy screwed his face into as fearful a look as he could muster, spit at the bandit chief's feet and said, "Reckon you ain't heard of me. I'm Killer Magee from Tennessee."

There was no reason for Lobo to fear a Señor Killer Magee nor anyone else, but he had a better than average curiosity and a respect for the talents of any highwayman. He scowled, squinted his one good eye and said, "When you speak to Lobo you should show more respect, Señor." There was a rattle of metal against metal and the point of Lobo's sabre pricked the skin on Windy's throat.

Windy held back his real feelings and pretended wide amazement. *"El Lobo!"* he whispered. "Is it true you are the great Lobo himself? *Señor*, forgive me! I did not understand." He bowed low. "After being with such swine as those who ride with El Diablo how was I to know I was in the presence of such a great man?"

El Lobo was obviously flattered. He said, "You speak perfect Spanish, Señor Killer Magee."

"You flatter me," Windy said humbly.

Lobo dismissed his men with a nod. "Come, have a swallow of wine with me and tell me about El Diablo and his famous horse. If you lie to me I will cut your throat."

"The dog who would lie to Lobo should have his throat cut," Windy said vehemently.

"That is so," Lobo agreed. He made a wild slash with his sword and Windy felt the breeze of the blade slice across his Adam's apple. He gulped, made a good attempt at a grin and preceded his captor to the largest of the three cabins, fully

aware that the saber tip was constantly close to his back.

The dirt floored cabin was large and roomy. There was a low fire in a native stone fireplace. A sombreroed guard with bandilleros of cartridges stood on either side of the door. In the far corner of the room was an old man and a girl. The clothing of both these two was strangely out of keeping with the rest of the surroundings. The girl had luminous brown eyes and milky skin and jet black hair. The old man wore a better than average black broadcloth suit. Lobo made no attempt to introduce them to Windy McCloud. He sat down at the single table, uncorked a straw-encased jug of wine, handed it to the Texan and said, "We drink, then you talk. After that, maybe you die."

The girl started to cry and the old man tried to comfort her. Lobo said, "Señorita, I have told you before this sound irritates me. Alvarez! See what you can do."

ONE of the guards left his post at the door, walked over and slapped the old man hard across the mouth. The old man was stoically silent. Windy felt his flesh crawl. He saw that Lobo was eyeing him closely. The bandit chief said, "The best way to handle cry babies. You agree, Señor Killer Magee?"

Windy swallowed twice, said, "Hot coals in their shoes are good too." He glanced sideways and saw the horror in the eyes of the girl.

Lobo said, "I must try this some time. Good wine, no?"

"It is rotten wine," Windy said.

Lobo half rose from his chair, glowered across the table, then sat back and smiled. He nodded his head in approval. "At least you tell the truth about the wine," he said. "It is very bad wine."

But bad wine or not, the bandit drank heartily, wiped his mouth with his bare arm and said, "Your story, please."

Windy made it good. He had quite a reputation as a talker and in some quarters it was said the red-headed Texan was not above molding the truth a bit to make it fit his purposes. He went through all the gestures, the grunts, the groans and the grimaces as he related how with his bare hands he had choked the life out of the mighty El Diablo, whipped six of his best men and then ridden boldly away on El Picaro.

Lobo was pensive a long time, his one eye screwed thoughtfully. He slapped the table with his fist then and said, "You are a fine liar, Señor Magee. But I like you. I like you and I can use you."

A dubious enticement, to say the least, Windy figured, but he wanted to go on living. He said, "It would be an honor to be allowed to work with the great Lobo."

Lobo got up a little unsteadily and puffed with importance. Sweeping his hand he said, "There in the corner you see the great Don Luis Salazar of Rancho Los Robles. You see also his beautiful daughter Violeta. Don Luis made a mistake. He let El Diablo steal his horses instead of me. He should have waited for me. I am angry with Don Luis and he does not like my hospitality. Tell me, Señor Magee, do you not think it is worth more than twenty horses to allow Don Luis and the lovely Violeta to return to their family?"

Windy felt a tingle of perspiration on his forehead, not knowing what was coming next. He said, "I always say it's worth whatever you can get."

"*Si,*" Lobo said. "These are my thoughts. You are not well known in Calabasas. You will rid to the Rancho Los Robles and strike a bargain." The bandit chief was thoughtful again. "How will they know for sure?" he said to himself. Then, struck by a brilliant idea, "Perhaps you should take one of the old

man's ears, with you for sure proof, no?"

Windy met the beautiful brown eyes of Violeta, tried vainly to transfer some ray of hope to her and failed. He said, "Why not a lock of the lovely lady's hair,?"

"No good," Lobo said. "The old man's ear is better."

The girl spoke for the first time, her voice escaping between her tightly clenched teeth. "You filthy beasts! You heartless pigs! Do you think you will get away with this? Do you think Ramon and the others will not find you? I'll see you all drawn and quartered!"

Lobo heaved a great sigh of exasperation. "Alvarez!" he said. "She has mentioned again the name of this Ramon, even after I have forbid it."

Alvarez set down his rifle, went over and grabbed the old man by the hair and started slapping him hard, first one side of the face and then the other. The girl pleaded pitifully, and Windy stood there watching it, trying to keep the emotions out of his face. The blows of Alvarez became harder and harder and finally old Don Luis Salazer slumped forward, unconscious.

There was a loud shout from outside and one of the men who had brought Windy in came breaking into the cabin without formality. "They have come!" he yelled excitedly. "The men from Rancho Los Robles! Six of them!"

"So?" Lobo said, tilting the wine jug.

"We have done well, *Jefe,*" the Mexican said, twisting his hat in his hand. "Of the six, four are dead and one is captured." He hesitated, saving his grand surprise, then he leaned close and whispered hoarsely, "It is Ramon Ramirez himself. We have him here!"

There was a quick cry from the girl and then two men came in supporting a handsome young Mexican between them. The guards gave a shove and the young man staggered through the door, tripped over his own feet and fell full length on the floor.

The girl got up and ran across the room and knelt beside the unconscious man. She was crying pitifully.

Lobo said, "So! Now we have the great Ramon Ramirez! The great one who is so anxious to slap the face of Lobo." His booted foot flashed out and landed solidly against the side of the young man's head.

CHAPTER THREE

Guard of Honor

IN THE next few seconds Windy McCloud had to make a couple of the toughest decisions he had ever faced in his life. Ramon Ramirez, sprawled half unconscious there on the floor, raised his head and more from instinct than plan tried to crawl away. A gleam of sadistic pleasure came into Lobo's one good eye.

He stepped forward, placed the heel of his boot on Ramon's extended hand, shifted his whole weight to that one foot and started pivoting back and forth slowly. The crunch and grind of bones was clearly audible. The girl Violeta threw herself on the bandit with such unexpected ferocity that he was knocked off balance, and sat down hard and remained there, blinking stupidly.

Windy knew he could snatch a rifle away from one of the guards and beat El Lobo's brains out with it before anyone knew what had happened. He would have enjoyed doing it. But it was a long ways from the cabin to the mouth of the narrow canyon that led out to the hills. Between here and there were a dozen or more cutthroats who both feared and worshiped the maniac Lobo.

So in those seconds Windy took a long range view of things, ducked forward, grasped the girl roughly by the shoulder,

spun her around and sent her staggering across the room. He followed her, right hand raised as if he were going to strike her. With his left hand he gripped her shoulder, pinioned her against the wall, and with his face an inch from hers he said in English, "Behave yourself and don't get hurt. I'm on your side."

He released his grip then and turned to Lobo who was just getting to his feet, fighting to recover some of his dignity. Windy spoke in Spanish. "You have a wildcat here. I would like the job of taming her."

Lobo squinted his eye wickedly and said, "Who wouldn't, Señor Magee? Who wouldn't?" Then to Alvarez, the guard, he said, "Take these three and lock them in the small cabin. Later we will have some fun with this Ramon." He brushed the dust from his filthy trousers and greasy vest and dismissed the entire incident with a wave of his hand. To the one who had brought the news of the attempted rescue by the Rancho Los Robles vaqueros Lobo said, "One thing more, Chico. There were six. Four you say are dead, if I can trust your tongue. One is here. What of the other, Chico my pigeon?"

The man called Chico was not sure. "He was a long way off, *Jefe,*" he said lamely. "He stayed back away from the others and when the firing started he must have turned toward Calabasas. We did not see him until it was too late."

"So you did not see him until it was too late, eh?" Lobo mocked.

Chico shifted his weight uneasily. "It was a thing that could not be helped. Perhaps it is of no importance."

Lobo's voice was soft and purring. "Of no importance, you think? It is not important that this pig will ride back to Calabasas and speak with Constable Brad Eker? It is not important that this fool of a lawman is crazy enough to try to come here? These are the things you call of no importance?"

"It was a thing that could not be helped, *Jefe,*" Chico said, backing toward the door. "We did not think—"

Lobo had the sword half drawn from its scabbard. With a quick twist he freed it from the metal case and advanced on the frightened Maxican. "You did not think, eh?" The sword arced, sliced, flashed back and cut again. There were two wicked gashes running from Chico's temple to his chin. Blood oozed slowly, then ran free and seeped down the swarthy neck and spread over the man's shirt and dripped to the floor. Chico began whimpering like a baby. Lobo smiled happily, wiped the sword blade with his thumb and forefinger. He said, "Next time you will think, Chico my pigeon."

AND NOW the bandit seemed to completely forget Windy McCloud. He was obviously upset over the escape of the one Rancho Los Robles vaquero. He seemed not the least reluctant to admit his respect of Brad Eker, the half-pint constable Windy had met in Calabasas. Alvarez ventured a suggestion to his worried chief.

"But if we wait here, *Jefe,*" Alvarez said, "perhaps they will not find us. No one has found this place yet—even El Diablo does not know. And if they do find us they could never ride through the canyon."

"When I want advice from pigs I will ask for it," Lobo snapped. "Do you not think the buzzards would circle this place? Men would come to find out why. Is there not a chance that one man in the posse would escape and lead others here?" He turned to Windy then, became owlishly wise and started punching himself in the chest with his thumb.

"It is not for nothing that I am the greatest bandit in the Malibu hills," he

said. "Have you observed the killdeer bird, Señor Magee? She walks like a wounded one, dragging her wing when danger is near her nest. I will do the same and this fool Brad Eker and his posse will follow. I know a canyon not far away where I can trap them easily. Then let the buzzards circle."

Windy was thinking rapidly. He said, "It is too bad that you have the prisoners. You will leave them here, I suppose."

"You suppose wrong, Señor Magee," Lobo said. "They are too valuable to leave behind. Ramon because he is such a nice play thing, and the girl and her father because of the ransom money I intend to collect. No, they go too. It is only you who worries me."

"Me?" Windy said, arching his right eyebrow. "Are we not going to work together? Why should you worry about me?"

"Because you are such a liar," Lobo said. "I like you very much but I do not trust you. Perhaps it is best if I kill you now, and it will give me pains in the heart to do it."

Windy swallowed hard and thought fast. He took a knife from his pocket and snapped open the blade. El Lobo eyed it closely. Windy said, "I was thinking of the old man's ear. I am good at making hard bargains."

Lobo shrugged. "There is plenty of time," he said. "Perhaps a plan will come to me." He turned and strode out of the cabin, calling loudly to his men. The guards, Gomez and Alvarez, had taken the three prisoners over to the small cabin. Windy was alone. And the minute he realized it he sat down heavily, dragged out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He picked up the straw covered wine jug, shook it, tilted it to his lips and drained it. After that he made himself a cigarette and sat staring at the floor, thinking.

Outside he could hear the scattered voices of Lobo's crew making their plans to leave this valley hideout, thereby serving the double purpose of leading Constable Brad Eker's posse away from the stolen horses and into an ambush. Windy got up and went outside. No one was paying any attention to him. He saw the small shack some fifty yards away with Gomez and Alvarez lounging against the door. He turned and walked that way.

Halfway to the shack Windy took the knife from his pocket again and opened the blade. He came to the cabin and the guards eyed him speculatively. In English Windy said, "Listen you two lop-eared rannihans, either one of you speak any English?"

Gomez and Alvarez looked at each other and then at Windy. Alvarez said, *"Que dice, señor?"*

Still speaking in English Windy said, "I said you were both sons of billy goats not fit to peck corn with the chickens. Besides that, you stink."

Albarez smiled and said, *"No hablamos Ingles."*

In Spanish Windy said, "Pardon me. Sometimes I forget and speak in English. I have come for the ear of the old he-goat inside and it was of him I was thinking when I spoke in English. Sometimes I cannot find the proper words in Spanish."

Alvarez nodded in sympathy and said he understood. He pushed open the door with the butt of his rifle and Windy stepped into the dank foul cabin. The girl gave a little gasp of terror when she saw the knife in Windy's hand.

RAMON had come around and was sitting there surveying his broken hand. He was a handsome lad, a couple of years older than Violeta. In Spanish he started telling Windy McCloud what he thought of him and of all the McCloud ancestors for a long way back.

Windy cut him short, speaking in a sharp barking voice as if he might be swearing. He said, "If any of you three speak English just nod your head and listen." The expression that crossed the face of both Ramon and Violeta told him they understood.

Windy said, "My name's not Killer Magee and I'm not after your father's ear. I'm just a poor old Texas boy trying to get along and I'm just as much a prisoner here as you are. I'm anxious to save my own hide and I want to take you along with me. Now do as I say and maybe we can do something about it."

They listened, and a few minutes later Windy came out of the cabin, herding Don Luis, Violeta and Ramon along ahead of him. He motioned for the guards to follow and he marched the prisoners straight to Lobo himself.

Without giving the bandit a chance to speak Windy said, "I had to kick the old one in the teeth to make him behave." Then turning to the nearest Mexican he said, "Hurry up and get horses for these three. You think we have all day to wait for you? Bring El Picaro for myself. Alvarez! Gomez! Come here and guard the prisoners and if they do not behave put them to sleep. *Andale!* You think a man like El Lobo has nothing to do but stand around and think for you?"

Lobo eyed Windy thoughtfully, apparently decided a man without a gun couldn't be dangerous and might be useful, shrugged his shoulders and went about his business of handing out ammunition to his men.

Windy heaved a quick sigh of relief, nudged Ramon in the back with his elbow then said to Alvarez, "Get me some thongs to tie their hands."

Alvarez said, *"Si, Señor,"* and hastened to do as he was told.

Three horses and El Picaro were led out and in English Windy said, "I'm sorry, lady. They don't seem to have no side saddle."

Ramon flushed darkly, his eyes bright. He spoke in precise clipped English. He said, "A gentleman would not even mention it."

Windy fidgeted some, thinking maybe that might be true. But when he looked into the beautiful and grateful eyes of Violeta he wasn't concerned. He even got the feeling that under different circumstances he might have been able to give this Ramon a run for his money. He got busy tying their hands, grunting over his efforts as he cinched down the bonds.

He had to help them mount, since their hands were tied, then he swung into the saddle of El Picaro and lined up with the band of horsemen who were getting ready to leave the valley. Everything was going fine. Only then did Lobo ride close. A pistol had replaced the sword at his waist. The bandit smiled, too sweetly. He said, "You are going with us, Señor Magee?"

"That was my plan," Windy said.

"It is all right," Lobo said. "You will be harmless."

He gave the order and the armed band started to ride. And suddenly Windy realized there were six men in front of him and six men behind. The man directly behind had his pistol drawn. Lobo was taking no chances with his new recruit.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ghost of El Diablo

THE BREAK Windy wanted came an hour after they had left the canyon. The country here was rugged, with high rock cliffs and steep slopes, and the brush made the dim trail all but impassable. Until now the band had ridden close together, compact, but such an arrangement was no longer feasible. Lobo rode back and pompously ordered Gomez and Alvarez

to stay with the prisoners, guarding them. He included Windy with old Don Luis and the others.

Something was said then about checking the prisoners' bonds. Windy felt a quick sinking in the pit of his stomach, saw the white lines at the corners of the girl's mouth. He waited tense while Gomez rode close, took a quick glance at the bound hands of the old man, his daughter and Ramon, then nodded his satisfaction. Lobo said, "When we know each other better you will have more freedom, Señor Killer Magee. Until then I trust that you do not mind?"

Windy scowled, curled his lip and said, "I would worry about your brain if you trusted a man too freely."

Lobo smiled. He said, "We understand each other then." He motioned to his men and rode on, leaving Gomez and Alvarez to bring the prisoners along at a slower pace. Windy glanced at the girl and wished he could talk to her for a minute.

Ramon gave the appearance of slouching in his saddle, completely whipped, but Windy could see the young fellow was missing nothing. It was old Don Luis himself who gave Windy the biggest lift. The old man, his face badly marked by the many beatings he had received at the hands of Alvarez, was riding straight as a ramrod, his chin thrust out. His blue eyes glittered and on his shoulders rode all the confidence and dignity of a man who knows his position and is proud of it. Ramon glanced once at Windy, and Windy shook his head.

They rode single file into a narrow passage between towering rocks, Gomez leading the way, Alvarez bringing up the rear. When he was through the tight spot, Gomez stopped his horse and waited for the others to catch up with him. Ramon slowed his mount, causing the girl's horse to collide with his own. The old man pushed forward as if he hadn't seen and Windy followed. They came through the pass bunched that way, one horse touching the other.

As soon as they were in the open Windy reined his horse alongside the girl's, pushing her horse aside. Don Luis did the same with Ramon. The four of them made a solid block now. Alvarez, just clearing the narrow corridor, shouted, *"Andale!* We cannot stay here all day."

"The girl's horse has gone lame," Windy complained.

Alvarez snorted with disgust and rode close to take a better look. It wasn't quite perfect. Gomez was too far away. But Windy took the chance. He spoke one word. *"Now!"*

Immediately the bound hands of Ramon and Don Luis jerked free of the rawhide thongs. Windy turned the half wild buckskin full into the side of Alvarez's horse and Ramon reached out with his one good hand and knocked Alvarez from the saddle. At that moment Gomez, seeing what was going on, came charging in. The girl, her hands free now, lashed the guard across the face with the long reins. At the same moment Windy swung a long looping right hand and caught Gomez on the point of the chin. He went out of the saddle and hit the ground hard.

But Alvarez was not out. He got to his knees, grabbed Windy's left stirrup and hung on. Ramon started to dismount. Windy yelled, "Ride for it, you fool! Get the girl out of here!" Windy jerked his foot from the stirrup, kicked, and Alvarez went end over end. Ramon turned his horse and followed Violeta and her father who by this time were streaking through the brush down toward the open country and rolling hills that would lead to Calabasas.

WINDY had planned to follow them. It was the thing they had worked out there in the cabin. But at that moment

Gomez came around enough to grab El Picaro's bridle. The horse started plunging and rearing. Alvarez, back on his feet, got hold of Windy's leg again and hung on. The big buckskin went crazy.

He reared straight up on his hind legs and came down hard and then started that crazy corkscrew bucking. Windy, with one foot out of the stirrup, didn't stay with him three seconds. The ground came up and pounded him on the head and Gomez and Alvarez landed on his chest.

Gomez was all for doing away with Señor Killer Magee then and there, but Alvarez protested. "After what has happened," Alvarez said, "Lobo will want to take care of this himself." One more good blow on the chin put Windy out of the argument completely, and when he came to he was back where he had started, crosswise of El Picaro, his hands and feet tied under the horse's belly.

He blanked out and wasn't much impressed when he came around and found Lobo standing over him with a quirt in his hand. Windy groaned once, moved, and the quirt sliced down and ripped the skin from his face. He felt the blood trickling into his eyes, seeping into the corner of his mouth.

He rolled over, protecting his head with his arms the best he could and the quirt started cutting a wicked pattern of lattice work across his back and shoulders. After awhile the punishment was too much and he could no longer feel it.

It was an hour before dawn when he awoke again, his throat parched for water, his back throbbing in a thousand places. He sat up and felt dizzy and sick, so he held his head between his hands and rested that way a long time. His feet were tied tightly and near him, a *serape* pulled around his shoulders, was Alvarez with a rifle.

There was the sharp smell of new coffee in the air and Windy's stomach began to grind at its emptiness. He called to Alvarez and asked if he could have something to eat. Alvarez shrugged, got up and went over to where Lobo was standing by the fire, shoving food into his mouth with his fingers.

Lobo seemed to think it over seriously, nodded, took a tin cup and filled it with the scalding liquid; then he started over to where Windy was huddled. The bandit said, "Good morning, Señor Killer Magee. Do you still feel so much like a killer?"

Windy did not answer.

"You know," Lobo said, pacing back and forth, "still no plan has come to me. I do not know what I should do with you. Perhaps make little ribbons with the knife, perhaps put hot coals in the boots as you yourself suggest. Ah, but forgive me. You

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wanted coffee. That's what you need."

Windy raised his head expectantly. The Mexican drew back his arm and threw the scalding liquid full in the redhead's face. Windy gave an uncontrollable howl of pain, then bit his lips viciously. The bandit chief roared with laughter, doubling up, slapping his knees. He went back to the fire, explained what he had done, going through the motions. The other men joined in the laughter. It was at that time that two lookouts came riding in on lathered horses.

Windy, his senses fuzzy with pain, barely heard what they were saying. He only knew that something unexpected was happening in this little game of hide-and-seek with Constable Brad Eker and his posse. It seemed that the great bandit El Diablo had also come out of hiding and was heading this way, bent, no doubt, on recovering the horses Lobo had stolen from him.

THERE was a hurried council of war and Windy forced himself to listen. If the two bands were to meet there would be shooting. It would give away the location of Lobo and his men and the ambush, so carefully laid for Brad Eker, would be spoiled. Lobo was waving his arms, cursing like a mad man. Suddenly he stopped. There was complete dead silence, then Lobo started to laugh.

He chuckled at first, then the laughter grew in volume, then he roared, stopping only long enough to assure everyone again that he was the smartest *bandido* in all of California. Smarter even than the great Joaquin Murrietta.

His men stood around him eagerly, waiting for his words of wisdom. Lobo preferred to remain mysterious. He said, "Saddle and bring El Picaro." Windy had a sudden uneasy feeling that he was going to be a part of this merry-making.

He knew it for sure when Alvarez came and goaded him to his feet, untying his leg bonds. Windy stumbled and fell three times before he could get the circulation going. His back felt as if were aflame, and his face, not seriously burned, stung horribly when he came near the fire where the men were cooking their breakfast. Lobo was still having trouble controlling his fits of laughter.

The bandit said, "You know, Señor Killer Magee, at last a plan has come to me. I have worried so much about something to do for you. And now it is all too easy. A plan to fit such a liar as you." He drew back his fist, ready to smash Windy in the mouth. He checked the blow and stood close, leering into Windy's face.

"So," Lobo said. "With your hands you choked out the life of El Diablo. With your fists you cripple six of his men and then you ride away on the horse." He spit in Windy's face. "You are nothing but a small gambler and a cheap horse-thief—a man who steals one horse to ride. In the Malibu hills such a horse thief gets his neck made long, especially when he steals the horse of Brad Eker." He turned to the guards. "Alvarez! Gomez! Set this cheap pig on the horse!" They grabbed him and put him into the saddle.

"All right, Señor Killer Magee," Lobo said softly. "You are free. You can go. You have ten minutes to leave here. If you are not out of sight by that time my men will go to work on you with knives. You cannot ride to the west for there are the cliffs between here and the ocean. So, my good friend Killer Magee, you can ride north where you will meet the ghost of El Diablo, the man who you have killed with your hands. He will be glad to see you. He was very proud of this horse."

Windy winced in spite of himself.

"Oh?" Lobo said. "You do not like this direction? Then maybe you would like to ride to the east. That way is Constable Brad Eker and his posse. Did you see the

big oak tree in Calabasas when you were there? You will not be the first horse thief to hang from its limbs when Constable Brad Eker gets you. Goodbye, Killer Magee. You are a free man!" With that the bandit chief stepped forward and slapped the buckskin across the rump. The animal streaked out into the brush and Windy McCloud clung to the saddle horn, violently sick.

CHAPTER FIVE

Twenty of the Devil's Horses

A DOZEN times in the next half hour Windy had a chance to think of Lobo's reference to the killdeer leading pursuers from its nest. He was doing exactly that for Lobo, and his chances for escape were practically nil. El Diablo, the bandit who had stripped him at cards, or Constable Brad Eker—either one would take after him the minute they saw him. Which ever one it was made little difference to Lobo.

If it was his rival El Diablo who made the move, Brad Eker would discover it and change his course. If it was Brad Eker who saw Windy McCloud first, El Diablo would see the trap and withdraw. Lobo couldn't lose, and in either event he would probably have no further worry about Windy McCloud.

After that Windy tried to figure what direction he should take. He could stop here and remain hidden in the brush, but if he did he would wind up caught between a crossfire in the inevitable battle. If Don Luis and Violeta and Ramon were with Constable Brad Eker, which was highly improbable, that would be the best chance. With their help he might be able to talk the over-zealous lawman out of a necktie party.

On the other hand, if they weren't. . . . He remembered the glittering eyes of the half-pint constable and remembered also that he, Windy McCloud, was a fugitive from justice as far as that particular lawman was concerned. It would be mighty hard to explain how he, a drifter, had come by the constable's horse.

Windy tried to remember all he could about this El Diablo, his slick-fingered card partner of two nights previous. At the moment all he could remember was that the man had laughed a lot and had six body guards. Those body guards hadn't been in too good shape when Windy had left them, but outside of keeping his thousand dollars and his horse, El Diablo had held no malice toward the Texas redhead. He had even complimented him on being a good fighting man. Windy decided his best chance lay in that direction.

His mind was made up for him a lot faster than he had anticipated. He rode out of the brush into a small clearing. A rawhide riata snaked out of nowhere, settled around his shoulders and jerked him from the saddle. A half hour later he was greeting the surprised and pleased El Diablo.

Windy forced a thin grin. He looked at the Mexican who was as tall as himself and said, "I had no idea I was playing cards with such a famous man the other night. If I had I would have had better sense than steal his horse."

El Diablo laughed. He said, "In the towns I sometimes forget to give my name. Tell me, how do you like El Picaro?"

"Too much horse for me," Windy said by way of a compliment.

"I suppose," El Diablo said. "But you are quite a man, Windy McCloud. You whip six of my men and steal my horse. What has happened to your face and your back?"

WINDY was thinking a little faster now. He said, "A thousand dollars is a lot of money. I was looking for a way to make it back. I now have twenty

horses from Rancho Los Robles—the prettiest Morgans you ever did see."

"You lie," El Diablo said, but his eyes showed the doubt that was in his mind.

Windy shrugged. "I was up on the road when Lobo and his men surprised you. I saw everything—how you were knocked out of the saddle. That's when I took El Picaro. I followed Lobo and when they camped for the night they drank too much wine and I drove off the horses. I have them hidden in a canyon not more than ten miles from here."

"If it is so why do you tell me?" El Diablo wanted to know.

"I am a stranger here," Windy said. "Where will I sell twenty horses? I asked the same question of Lobo, but the man is crazy—a son of a goat. So, I had to choke the life out of the mighty Lobo and fight my way out of his camp. But I still have the horses. You seem more of a gentleman than this Lobo. I thought maybe I could get back some of the money I lost."

"You reason like a child," El Diablo said. "Why should I pay you? I will go take them."

"You don't know where to find them."

"I have ways of making you tell."

"Why waste the time?" Windy shrugged. "While you play games the Rancho Los Robles men will find them and then they will be gone. You have nothing against me except that I took your horse. I have brought him back—only a friendly loan. Surely it is worth something to get the twenty horses with no troubles?"

"Where are the horses?"

"Come with me and I'll show you."

El Diablo thought it over for some time, nodded his head shortly and said, "Fair enough." He gave orders to his men.

Windy protested. "Not all of them at this time of the day. Constable Brad Eker is in the canyons looking for me—he thinks I am the one who stole El Picaro from him. We would be discovered. You and I will go. Let the rest of your men cut across the valley and up that slope"—pointing. "They can wait in the box canyon just over the hill. We can join them there and then after dark you can move the horses."

It put El Diablo in a spot. To refuse to go alone would be admitting to his men that he was afraid of a lone Texas redhead with no gun. He gave the orders Windy had suggested, let Windy stay on El Picaro. Anger was boiling inside the big bandit. He said, "I could easy cut your throat, Windy McCloud."

"But you won't," Windy said smugly. "Not if you want to find the horses. And if I hold up my end of the bargain you are honor-bound to keep your word. Is this not so?"

The prospect of recovering the horses so easily was too much for the big bandit. He jerked his head, said, "All right. We ride."

"Not until I get something to eat," Windy said, keeping the upper hand.

They hit the trail a half hour later, winding back cautiously the way Windy had come. But he kept working further and further east, as close as he dared to where Brad Eker's posse must be, taking that chance rather than let El Diablo see that Lobo's men were in the box canyon beneath the cliff.

If things worked out right now El Diablo's crew should drop straight into the ambush that Lobo had so carefully set for that rope-anxious constable, Brad Eker. What would happen after that Windy wasn't sure, but he knew that a lot of Malibu bandits would be taken care of in a manner quite satisfactory to the law and the peaceful elements of the San Fernando Valley.

El Diablo had little to say. He was a complete contrast to the swashbuckling,

comic opera Lobo, but in his quietness and the way he kept his hand close to his six-shooter Windy knew he was a man just as dangerous and he knew too that any sudden move now—a contact with Brad Eker's posse or discovery by Lobo's ambusher—would mean the quick end of one red-headed Texas drifter.

Windy tried to strike up a conversation about the poker game that he and El Diablo had had, but the big bandit cut him short. "If you produce the horses," the bandit said, "everything will be fine. If you do not you will have played your last game of poker."

Windy located the spot where Don Luis and his daughter and Ramon had made their break and he kept wide of it, knowing there would be signs of a struggle there. He didn't want to have to explain to El Diablo how it happened.

FROM THERE on he recognized one land mark after another and in time they came to the narrow crevice where the small creek bubbled out from between the sandstone cliffs. There was sign of many horses here, coming from both directions, but the hoof marks were so intermingled that it looked as if the riders had passed by without turning in. Windy motioned toward the opening. "In there," he said. "Up that creek and there's a little meadow in the rocks."

El Diablo eyed him suspiciously, smiled slightly and said, "You will go first, Windy McCloud." He drew his gun and motioned for the redhead to lead the way.

But with every step they took up the sandy bottom creek El Diablo's spirits rose. By the time they came to the end of the corridor and into the small valley the bandit had holstered his gun and was completely friendly. When he saw the twenty horses there in the corral he dismounted and started cooing like a dove.

"My little *pobrecitos,*" he said, rubbing the velvet muzzle of one of the Morgans. "Windy McCloud, my good friend, you are a better man than I thought. Single handed, stealing the horse from that half-wit Lobo."

Later as Diablo examined the cabins his joy was unbounded. "So this is where the pig keeps himself," he chortled.

"Who?" Windy asked innocently.

"El Lobo! This is the place he hides!" Diablo became suddenly suspicious. "Wait a minute, Windy McCloud. Is it not quite a coincidence that you drive the horses to Lobo's own stronghold?"

Windy made himself a cigarette and shrugged. He said, "El Diablo, I am a business man. I promised to deliver you the horses. There is no one here to stop you from taking them. Is that not enough?"

El Diablo offered his hand. "It is enough," he admitted. "I will ask no more questions."

The bandit poked around through the odds and ends of the main cabin, found Lobo's sword and held it out contemptuously. "Do you know what this pig boasts?" he asked Windy. "That he will be king of the Malibu hills." He tossed the sword into a corner and his eyes went to the array of straw-covered jugs. "Come, Windy McCloud," he said. "Let us take some of the pig's wine."

"The other part of the bargain," Windy said. "How much are the horses worth to you?"

"Later, my good friend. Later." Diablo waved him aside. "You and I must see much of each other. Come, let us ride back to where my men are waiting and then over a bottle of Lobo's choice wine we will reach an agreement."

Windy was reluctant. He wanted nothing more now than to get out of here, with or without his pay. But El Diablo was an insistent man—even to the point of getting suspicious again and half draw-

ing his six-shooter. Windy shrugged and said, "I just didn't want to be a bother to you."

El Diablo laughed. "My friend, my good twin, how could you be a bother? We will sell the horses and we will have a fiesta. And there will be more horses to sell! You told me yourself you came from nowhere and did not know where you were going. What more could you ask? Señoritas in Ventura, plenty of good wine, money to spend!" He drew his gun, jabbed it at Windy's stomach and motioned the redhead toward the door. "Come now, I want you for my friend."

So they rode back through the narrow corridor, Windy still astride the jug headed El Picaro, El Diablo, a jug crooked on his elbow, sampling Lobo's wine. And when they came outside into the open country they ran into the unmistakable echoes of gunfire. Windy McCloud felt his stomach shriveling up into a small knot.

CHAPTER SIX

Viva the King of Malibu!

THE GUNSHOTS were quite a distance away and from the direction Windy knew there was no doubt that the men of El Diablo and the infamous Lobo had met. He tried to picture how it would be—El Diablo's men riding without a thought of danger and Lobo's ambush crew caught from an unexpected angle. It wouldn't be a pretty thing to watch. El Diablo misinterpreted the gunfire. "My men! They have come upon the posse of Brad Eker!"

"That's it," Windy said quickly. "And we're too far away to help."

"But I have a good rifle," El Diablo said, his lips drawing into a thin line. "Perhaps we can get close enough that I can put a finish to this Brad Eker. He is too big for his pants, as you say. Already he has hung three of my men. Come along!"

"I don't reckon there's any reason for me to go," Windy said hesitatingly. "Why don't you just pay me for the horses and we'll call it quits?"

The gunfire was a constant crackle now. El Diablo looked at the Texan a long time. He said slowly, "How much do you know about this, Windy McCloud?"

"Nothing," Windy protested. "I told you Brad Eker was hereabouts. He's after me. He wants me for horse stealing. If your men ran into him, can I help it?"

"You come with me, Windy McCloud." The six-shooter was out again, level with Windy's belt buckle.

They pushed their horses hard, making as much time as they could through the rocks and brush. And in time they came to a bald bare ridge a hundred feet higher than those immediately surrounding and they could look straight down into the box canyon where Lobo and his crew had waited to wipe out Constable Brad Eker.

They could see the thin curls of gunsmoke, hear the report of rifles, the short ugly bark of six-shooters. They could see men shifting positions on either wall of the canyon and El Diablo said softly, "That is not the posse of Brad Eker, Windy McCloud. That is the men of my friend Lobo."

Windy could feel the perspiration on his forehead. He looked at the big bandit who was eyeing him unwinkingly. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "All right Diablo, so it's Lobo."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let my men go that way?"

Windy stared at his boot toes a long time and when he looked up his left eye was cocked closed, his face screwed. He said, "Because I figgered you and me could do all right with those twenty horses if we didn't have to divide 'em."

El Diablo said, "You are a cold-blooded one."

Windy's gaze didn't waver. "Men are cheap," he said. "There are a hundred in these hills and in Ventura who would like to ride with El Diablo. Should you divide with men who have done nothing to recover the horses—men who were such fools that they let Lobo take them away from you after you had them?"

El Diablo said, "A cold-blooded one—and a smart one." He holstered his gun, went to his horse and untied one of the jugs from the saddle strings. He pulled the cork with his teeth, came back and offered the jug to Windy.

"I like a man who thinks, Windy McCloud," he said. "You and I could get along." He drank, smiled broadly and added, "Perhaps that fat pig of a Lobo will get a bullet through his head before this is over. It will save me the trouble."

"To El Diablo, the new King of the Malibu Hills," Windy said, tilting the jug.

El Diablo thought that over for some time, then took the jug that Windy offered him. He drank deeply, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "How would I look with a sword, Windy McCloud?"

THEY both laughed, though Windy didn't feel much in the mood. And an hour and a full jug later Windy and El Diablo were friends. They were still hunkered there on the barren crest of the hill. Below them in the canyon the firing had become dismally scattered. As close as they could figure it there weren't more than a half-dozen men left in fighting condition. They had either fled or fought their last fight.

El Diablo's eyes were bright with the wine and his tongue was getting thick. To Windy the sweet yellow juice of the grape was beginning to be sickening. He kept fighting against the swirling dizziness that was constantly trying to creep up on him. El Diablo uncorked the second jug, drank greedily, put his arm around Windy's shoulder and avowed for the thirtieth time that Windy McCloud was his very best twin.

The bandit wanted to sing. He said, "How about *Adios Mi Chaparitas?*" Windy shrugged, joined in with a baritone that was neither good nor on-key. El Diablo cried a little and had some more wine.

Windy figured the time was about right so he said, "So we're partners. Now about that thousand dollars you won the other night. I'm not saying it wasn't slick the way you wrung in those extra aces. But let's split the thousand, and that way we'll start out even, old friend."

El Diablo rolled his eyes and smiled happily. "Oh no, Windy McCloud," he said. "That was business transacted before the partnership began. You have sleeves and you had the cards. Is it my fault you did not have the extra aces?"

"I just thought—" Windy started.

"Don't think," El Diablo cautioned him. "Let me do the thinking. You steal the horses and hide them in the canyon and I will do the thinking. It will be a fine partnership."

"I can see that," Windy said.

The firing in the canyon had ceased completely. El Diablo sighed deeply. "It wasn't a very good crew I had," he said. "Perhaps it is just as well this way. With that pig of a Lobo out of the way I will have my choice of the best men in the hills."

Windy McCloud didn't answer. He was staring straight down the slope in the general direction of Calabasas. A long column of men was working its way up the canyon toward where the firing had rattled all afternoon. It wasn't too hard to distinguish the miniature man on the

bay horse. Constable Brad Eker. The sight quickly drove the fumes of the wine from Windy's brain. El Diablo, catching the drifter's expression, shook his head to clear his befogged eyes and said, "What is the matter, my twin?"

Windy Jerked his thumb. "Take a look over your shoulder."

El Diablo had a little trouble focusing his eyes. "The lawman."

"I think they've spotted us," Windy said. "I would judge he has glasses and if he has he would have no trouble seeing us from there."

El Diablo's eyes became cunning. He said, "I would hate to be you, Windy McCloud."

"Me?" Windy said, his voice squeaking. "Why me?"

The bandit shook his head pityingly. "Because Constable Eker is so unreasonable about losing that horse of his. It will make him very happy when he can hang you to the oak tree in Calabasas."

WINDY picked up the wine jug, tilted it to his lips, thrust his tongue into the neck so he would not have to swallow any of the liquid. He said, "But I didn't steal his horse. I brought the horse back to you."

"But, my good twin," said El Diablo. "Did you not understand? I have given you El Picaro for a present. He is yours. Now we must ride in different directions. When the constable sees the red shirt riding on his horse he will probably follow you. It is very unfortunate."

Windy waited a good fifteen seconds and then he twisted, threw himself forwards and grabbed the outlaw's legs.

Windy caught his arm, twisted it back, then drove his knee into the bandit's stomach. His right hand scooped up the wine jug and brought it smashing down against El Diablo's skull.

Windy moved fast then. He stripped off his red shirt and exchanged it with El Diable, saying as he did, "I would give you the shirt off my back, my dear twin." After that he lifted the bandit's gun belt, buckling it around his own middle. Running hurriedly through El Diablo's pockets he found a good-sized roll of bills—there must have been close to a thousand dollars.

He mounted the sorrel El Diablo had ridden, rode out into full sight there on the crest of the hill and started waving his hat. He saw Constable Brad Eker's posse turn and head that way. He took off down the slope in the general direction of the Pacific Ocean.

A half hour later he topped another hill and stopped to look back. He could see El Diablo plainly. The bandit was walking around unsteadily. The bright red shirt was like a blotch of paint against a clean canvas. Suddenly the bandit must have seen the posse. He threw himself into the saddle of the big jug-headed El Picaro and started loping wildly down the ridge back toward the Malibu hills.

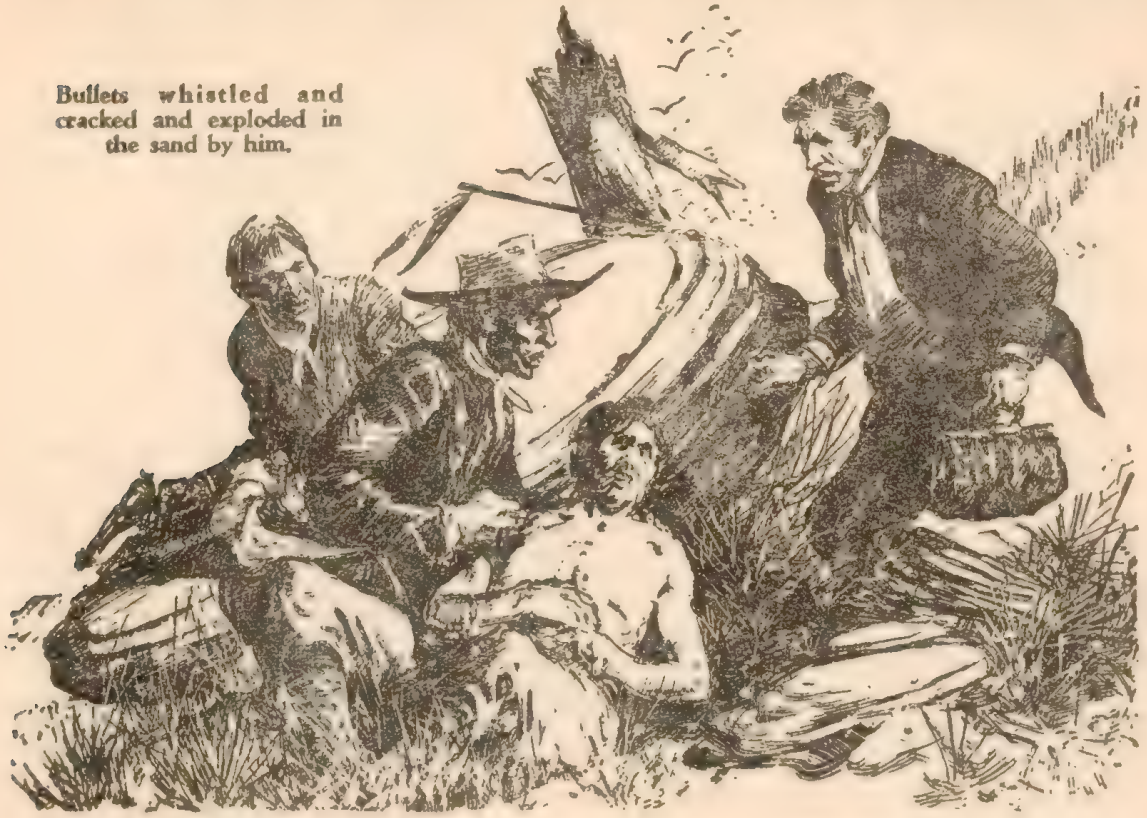
Even from here Windy knew that he himself was clearly visible to the posse. He could visualize the conflict that must be going on in Constable Brad Eker's mind. The posse turned and charged full tilt after the disappearing red shirt.

Windy McCloud felt the roll of bills in his pocket, heaved a big sigh and turned his horse toward the long reach of Topanga Canyon that cut through the hills and came out on the white sands of the ocean. Once he looked back at the fleeing figure of El Diablo and he thought of Ramon and the girl Violeta. To himself he said, "That Ramon is a smart jigger. He'll know where to find his horses. I hope he's good to that gal. She was real purty."

With that he headed his horse down the slope. There was Santa Monica ahead and then Los Angeles. A man ought to be able to find himself a pretty good poker game.

THE END

Iron, Blood, and Sand!



Bullets whistled and cracked and exploded in the sand by him.

Not only in the flaming crucible of battle may a man prove himself. . . . Sometimes his own ignorance and damned tenderfoot softness may serve, as it did young Merritt, as a stepping stone to the tough, blood-sweating glory that is the heritage of the plains trooper!

MERRITT stood by the window of his office, gazing out on the chilly parade ground. On the tawny square of Arizona earth a formation was breaking up. Orders of the day had been read and every able-bodied trooper assigned to a detail. The not-so-able-bodied would remain in quarters until the unpitying notes of Sick Call sent them dragging to the surgeon.

Contract-Surgeon Merritt's office was tiny, mud-walled, and plainly adorned with a framed diploma and a wooden table and chair. The instruments on the table were new. The date on the diploma was recent. But the newest-looking article in the room was the surgeon himself.

Merritt was twenty-four, spare, hungry-eyed and tall, and wearing an air of earnestness that edged over into uncertainty. His tenseness seemed to center about his eyes and lips, keys to a deep-cored uncertainty. He had begun to grow a light brown imperial, but this, too, looked brand new.

He heard Sick Call lustily blown. The men came straggling in. There were seven patients, three men from F Troop and four

By FRANK BONHAM

from Company C. Any one of them could be the man whose appearance Merritt had dreaded ever since he had been at Fort Graham—the man whose ailment would not be one he could swab away or dismiss with advice to spend a day or two in quarters. The one with typhoid or cholera, for instance, who would bring down on Merritt's head all the nightmarish responsibility of an epidemic, and expose him for the rabbit-souled incompetent he was.

PRIVATE CROUSE had infantryman's complaint. "Them new boots of mine rubbed the b'jasus out of my heel on guard duty, sir."

"Wait outside," Merritt said. "That wants cauterizing."

He finished with the infantrymen and called the first of the cavalrymen, First Sergeant Broom. The rank told him Broom must be feeling rather badly. First sergeants, with the eyes of the troops upon them, did not succumb easily to wrenched knees and sore throats.

Merritt began his questioning. Suddenly he knew he must relax. The muscles at the base of his neck were taut. He was being too grim with the men. He was half-conscious of a hope that Dr. Bell, the retiring surgeon, would drop in. He hoped and yet dreaded it. Bell's eyes criticized and his manner was disdainful, but he was competent.

Old Dr. Bell had been officially relieved, after too many years on the border. Tomorrow he would depart for Tucson. Merritt anticipated his departure like a man on a South Sea island watching the last boat leave. Soon he would be beyond reach, his skill and his coolness no longer there for Merritt to fall back on. In the three weeks since Merritt had relieved him, he had had to call on the old man twice for assistance.

He had been ashamed of having to ask for help, and Dr. Bell had let him know, tacitly, that the army expected its contract-surgeons to make up their own minds, quickly and surely. While they were not actually in the army—wearing no insignia and often no regular uniform—they were unquestionably of the army, and expected to behave in a military manner. Merritt had known all that when, just out of Johns Hopkins, he signed up for a year's service on the frontier.

But Good God! he thought; you couldn't simply tell a man—even if you were sure that the swelling in his throat was cancer.

And that lonely Maine boy who had taken hartshorn in water, trying to find the gray seas and austere shores he loved. The men who carried him in thought it was food poisoning. And after Merritt brought him around and learned he'd been drunk when he did it, and heard him begging for a chance to make good, now that he knew death was the last thing he wanted, Merritt let them think it.

Medical school told you what to do about poisons; Army Regulations were specific about attempted suicide. But where did they teach you how to tell a man he must die in agony, or that he was going home with a bobtail discharge?

Sergeant Broom was a square-shouldered man of middle height with a torso like a flattened water keg. He was a brusque and capable trooper of forty. Merritt had a moment's shock when he looked at him. Broom's eyes were yellowish and dull and his skin was flushed. He tried to carry it off casually, but this was hard to do while holding onto the table for support.

"Feeling a little porely, Doctor," he said. "Thought I'd best get this throat swabbed."

Under Merritt's probing, he recited a list of complaints. His head ached; he'd been up all night shivering and burning, and he'd kept nothing on his stomach for two days. And now these spots on his

skin. . . He'd better go and see the Doctor, he reckoned. . . .

Something inside Merritt was quaking. He placed his hand on the edge of the table. "Have you ever—" He had to clear his throat. "Have you ever had typhoid fever, sergeant?"

Broom stared pathetically at him. "You ain't going to tie that on me, sir?"

"I want to see those spots."

The sergeant removed his shirt. Hope came creeping back to the doctor, almost afraid to show itself, merely scratching at the door. He knew what he had to do if it were typhoid. Isolate Broom; cancel all formations. Throw the post into terror and confusion.

But the spots weren't right. He questioned Broom further, but the sergeant was vague about everything except that he felt like hell. Merritt stepped to the porch and spoke to one of the other cavalrymen.

"Try to catch those men who just left. I want them and all the rest of you—"

It occurred to him suddenly that it was a poor time to be rash. After a not unusual absence of five months, the paymaster was unhurriedly making his rounds. Merritt understood that the escort which would take Dr. Bell to Tucson would make contact with the paymaster's train somewhere in the hills tomorrow, where they would exchange the surgeon for a wagon-load of back pay, bringing the money in and letting Bell go back with the paymaster's escort.

But with the garrison under quarantine, Bell could not leave. Nor could Merritt permit men from the garrison to mingle with troopers of the other patrol.

If Broom turned out not to have typhoid, Merritt would never live it down.

After a moment he said: "Never mind. I want one of you to find Dr. Bell for me. Tell him I'd like to see him at his convenience."

ISAAC BELL was a gaunt, brown-fleshed man who had given half his life to the army. The color had been bleached from his eyes until they were the scaled-gray of iron, and his brows were tufted with gray hairs like those of a lynx. He wore cavalry blues, but without insignia; his manner supplied the brass. He told Merritt that he still took off his hat to no one in army medicine. "But when I heard them referring to me as 'Old Dr. Bell,' I knew I wasn't fooling anyone about those winter patrols."

When he arrived, Merritt said: "I'd appreciate your having a look at this man, Doctor."

Bell listened to the sergeant's recital and made a terse examination. He turned to Merritt. "What's your diagnosis?"

Merritt was aware that under his heatless exterior Bell was angry. He found himself responding, surprisingly, with rancor. "I thought of typhoid, until I noticed those eruptions. They've got more the look of glanders. Sergeant," he asked suddenly, "has your horse been off its feed?"

Broom paused in the act of buttoning his shirt. "Come to think of it, sir, he *ain't* been quite right for a week!"

Merritt, tight-lipped, dispensed some medicine and dressed the sores. "You've caught glanders from your horse. I'll have him isolated and you'll spend a few days in the hospital. You'll be unhappy, but you aren't going to die."

Dr. Bell stood at the window until Merritt finished with the others. Then he turned.

"Why did you send for me, if you knew the answer?" he demanded.

"I wasn't sure," Merritt told him. "It might have been typhoid. I hadn't thought about the horse, before."

"You mean you *were* sure, but you wanted someone to back you up. Isn't that it?"

Merritt fidgeted with the tweezers.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But it seemed that so much depended on the diagnosis."

Bell stared at him with those fierce gray eyes. "So much! So little! If you'd brought a post of four hundred men through cholera, as I have, you'd know the meaning of 'so much.'"

He started for the door, but halted and came back. "Why did you take this job? There are easier jobs for a doctor."

Merritt said stiffly: "I'm not looking for an easy job. I like the army. I like medicine. It seems to me this is my place."

"It seems to me," Bell snapped, "that someone should have told you an army surgeon is something more than an ordinary doctor. He can't consult with a dozen other physicians every time he's in doubt. He's got to have an opinion of iron. If he is convinced that the sun won't come up tomorrow, that's how it's going to be. An opinion of iron," Bell repeated. "If you don't have it, develop it. Or else go into obstetrics. You can't make a mistake there."

Later that morning Merritt inspected the mess-hall and cook-house and paid a visit to the hospital. He felt sharply the poverty of this gaunt outpost, lost in a land where climate and Indians vied in savagery. Yet he felt that the loneliness and the privations would not distress him long, that he would take pride in sending in the best surgeon's reports in the Territory.

Bell's rebuke continued to sting. "An opinion of iron." But Bell was speaking from the standpoint of thirty years' service. There must have been a time when the metal of him, too, was over-flexible, because it wanted tempering.

But how did you acquire that sureness. with two hundred and twenty-five men depending on you to keep them in health, when the first blunder would destroy their faith in you?

At mess that night, Dr. Bell sat next to Captain Mason, the post commander. There was plenty of sour Mexican wine, and the cook had contrived stuffed wild turkey and roast pheasant. Conversation pivoted on Bell, who responded to the jokes and toasts with gruff humor.

But once Merritt caught a sharp glance between Captain Mason and his executive officer. "Have those wood-cutters come in yet?" Mason asked.

The lieutenant shook his head. Mason frowned and raised his wine glass. "They may have had trouble with one of the wagons. Tomorrow will be time enough to start worrying."

Then he added sourly: "Damn the hog-bellied politicians that run this Territory! They're trying to move Cochise again. I don't blame the devil for fighting back, but we're the lads that get our backsides shot off when they light the fires."

At eleven o'clock, Merritt was smoking his pipe on the veranda of the bachelor officers' building when Quarters sounded. Soldiers began to stride through the chilly darkness toward their barracks. A few minutes later there was the sharp challenge of a sentry on the west wall.

Merritt found himself standing, listening to the voice of the sentry, and a moment later he heard the gate open and saw lanterns flash on the harness of five horses which staggered into the post. It was the mangled remains of the wood-cutting detail.

He was already in his office, building a fire in the small corner hearth, when they brought the wounded in. Bell had come, lank and fuming and a little the worse for wine, with his ancient black bag in his hand. Merritt heard Captain Mason arrive while he was cutting the trouser leg from a trooper with a bullet-shattered shin-bone.

The man Bell was aiding, in somewhat better shape than the others, told the story of a canyon ambuscade by a bunch of Cochise Apaches. They had cut down four of the men who were loading wood and the rest of them had had to ride like hell

to get out of the deadly trap alive.

Dr. Bell finished with him, thrust the next man in the chair and went to work on a scalp slashed by a war-point. Merritt, out of the corner of his eye, saw the long fleshless fingers swiftly working, and once he heard the soldier groan. "Here, now!" Bell growled. "Don't be carrying on like a damned foot-soldier!"

Merritt finished cutting the trouser-leg away and gingerly probed for dirt and shreds of cloth in the wound. Luckily the man was unconscious, so that he could clean it thoroughly. Yet the gravity of the infected wound disturbed him. He persisted with the probing, beginning to perspire so that he had to wipe his face with his sleeve.

He wanted to believe he could save this man's leg. Yet he dreaded the thought of gangrene if he failed to get every particle of dirt out of the wound. At last he knew he had done all he could, but still he stood there turning the scalpel over in his hand.

He had heard that infection was somewhat less certain in the astringent air of the desert, and it was not pleasant to think of the man hobbling about the post on a home-made wooden leg, recalling, every time he looked at Merritt: *Dr. Bell would have saved it for me.*

When he looked up, Bell was standing across the table from him, disdain in the imperious old eyes. Bell's look lingered for a cool instant and then he turned to take the saw from the drawer of the table.

WHEN it was over and they had gotten the wounded under blankets in the hospital, they walked back. "When you get cleaned up," Bell said, "Captain Mason would like to see you in his office."

Merritt's glance was quick and uneasy. "What about?"

"About your leaving," Bell said. "I've told him I'm willing to stay on until he can find someone else."

A hot flush came up in Merritt's

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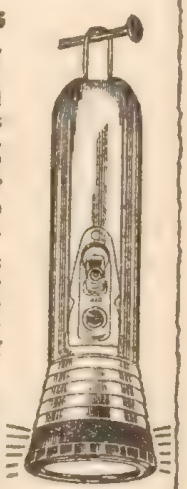

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FLASHLIGHTS AND BATTERIES

throat. "What do you mean? I don't want to leave."

"I don't suppose you do," Bell said drily. "But it's a matter of what's best for the men. Tonight was as close to combat conditions as you've ever worked. I think it's as close as you'll ever come. Once I thought you were going to faint; you were white as tallow. And then you stood over McCarthy, flipping coins in your mind, and in another few minutes he would have been conscious and there'd have been hell to pay."

He stopped at the stone-bordered path leading to his quarters. "Do you want some advice, Merritt? Find a small town in the East, where they have no doctor. Set up practice there. I think you'll do well. Pay particular attention to the ladies; they'll build a man's practice up faster than anything."

Merritt said through his lips: "You're an arrogant and cold-blooded one, Bell. If the army made you that way, I'm not sure I want it."

Bell chuckled. "The army either makes a doctor arrogant, or it breaks him."

Captain Mason had already written up the order and a clerk was working on the copies. Mason handed the doctor the special order relieving him of duty. He was a short, bald-headed, cigar-smoking man who had a sense of humor but seldom smiled, and might have had sympathy at one time but had had it deviled out of him.

He said, "This isn't your fault nor mine. It's the army's. They never will learn that a garrison ain't a nursing home. They send me officers that get a razor-nick and think they're bleeding to death. I get fifty replacements, and out of 'em I draw ten drunkards, two one-eyed privates, and so help me God I got a one-legged trooper last year!"

He looked at Merritt with a glint of humor. "But this is the first time I ever had a surgeon with a weak stomach. Be ready to leave at nine. We'll go out in some force, so Dr. Bell will be going with us. We meet the paymaster in the hills, and we may meet some Apaches, too. You'll go on to Tucson with the paymaster, after I get my money."

Merritt went out without a word. There were no words in him, only a deep and cauterizing shame. But he was angry as well, futilely angry at Bell for his intolerance. He couldn't be angry at the captain, somehow. He had merely turned him away as impassionately as he would have pulled a wind-broken horse out of the stable.

He started to pack, slowly and carelessly. He had almost persuaded himself that he didn't care, when suddenly he turned and drove his fist against the adobe wall in a short, solid punch.

"Damn him!" he breathed. "Damn him! I wish he'd break his damned neck and have to beg me to set it!"

IN THE clear amber light of the morning the patrol rode out of the post. There were seventy-five men in the party, led by Captain Mason himself. Bell and Merritt rode in the van with the officers, while the long double-file of blue tunics wound back to the ambulances. For a man new to it, there were the trappings of adventure: scuffing hoofs and arid dust; harness creaking, a man's cough; quiet laughter; and at the head of the column the thin, whipping scarlet of the guidon.

Merritt wondered how many of the men realized it was the new surgeon who was leaving, rather than the old. All of them, he supposed. He was impatient to be through with it. He found himself resenting the camaraderie which bound Bell to the others, but shut him out.

Captain Mason shook his forces out in a loose column as they rode across the gullied desert. The earth was dry and pebbly, without a trace of grass but supporting a forest of cactus and creosote brush. Eastward were the foothills where

the wood-cutters had been ambushed. Mason gazed often in this direction and kept well to the west, near a palisaded shore of mesas. His scouts rode far ahead and to the flanks.

"I'd given a year's fogeys," he said ironically, "to have some of them Congressmen along who cut appropriations last year. I'd put 'em out where they'd appreciate the comfort of decent arms and plenty of company!"

They made Antelope Well in the forenoon. The cavalrymen brought their horses up to the stone ring and watered them before they drank themselves. Afterward they chewed their lean rations and tightened cinches to move on.

Mason expected to make contact with the paymaster's train around sunset. About three o'clock, a scout came loping in from the front. "War party near Iron Pipe, Captain! I figure near a hundred of them."

Mason struck his knee. "By God, they're breaking loose! It'll be Owl Head, if it ain't the big boy himself."

He made some changes in the column, tightening it, yet not bunching the men. Merritt witnessed a change in him; a suppressed delight, a hard anticipation. His square walnut face, as hard as the butt of his revolver, reminded him of a poker player who could not quite forget he held a straight flush.

But Merritt could not forget what they might be riding into. He had never before been in a situation where his life was in actual danger. It was not quite fear he experienced, but it was a quick apprehension that made him strike his hands together against the cold more often, and shift in the saddle occasionally to scan the encroaching horizon.

A lofty sandstone mesa, pink and fluted against the afternoon's pale sky, mounted on their right until they rode in its gigantic shadow. Another scout came back to tell Mason the Apaches were moving slowly toward them a few miles ahead. Mason said, "All right."

A long peninsula of rubble reached from the foot of the mesa into the desert. Where its shoulder was against the cliff a narrow slot was evident, cleaving the mesa into two great mainlands. Mason scanned it with his glasses. He said, in what Merritt thought was alarm:

"Have that canyon reconnoitered. I don't believe the fool scouts have even seen it!"

The column was partly in advance of the canyon's mouth. The horses stood while a trooper rode at a trot up through the tumbled boulders. Suddenly they saw him wheel and fire his revolver back over his shoulder, and in the same instant horsemen began to sift down through the rocks.

MASON snapped a command and the urgent notes of Assembly cried high and thin in the afternoon. The troopers came into a long and ragged line, and Mason shouted an order which caused them to throw off and the horseholders to run back with the mounts while the firing line built up. The captain was an infantryman; he liked the ground under him when he fought, and he boasted that Indians feared the marksmanship of a dismounted soldier more than that of a man on horseback.

He stood at the center of the line with his revolver raised at shoulder height, an unromantic figure beside a rock. The boulders turned the attack of the Indians, so that as they came into the clear and swung into their wide, loping run before the troop, they had little speed. Mason's first shot uncorked the rattling fire of seventy carbines. Gaps appeared in the rim of the wheel of ponies.

Merritt was firing the revolver they had issued him on his arrival at the fort, but his hand was shaking so that he knew his shots had only nuisance value. He won-

dered if it would shake when it held a scalpel. He thought: By God, it won't!

The Indians pulled off. Mason took advantage of the pause to draw the line into a circle, with the horses and ambulances in the center. Though they had dropped a dozen of the attackers, leaving only a score, he did not appear cheerful. He was thinking, no doubt, of the others a few miles away.

In the midst of the next rush a man cried out and Merritt saw him fall. Dr. Bell strode to where he lay on the ground with his hands covering his face. He knelt beside him and unslung his canteen. After that it was a sergeant who took a ball through his hand. Merritt ran quickly to him. The trooper was on his knees looking at the red, spattered hole.

Before Merritt had finished with him he heard the bugle again, the notes piercing a distant, high yipping like the barking of coyotes at night. He paused with a roll of bandage in his hand. They were coming, now, the original force the captain had been looking for. Merritt did not understand the call, but he saw the men rise and begin to advance toward the base of the cliff. He finished bandaging the sergeant's hand and ran with them.

He heard someone call: "Doctor Merritt!" There was alarm in the call; he turned quickly to see Bell being supported between two cavalrymen. The surgeon's head sagged and his boot-toes dragged.

Merritt ran back in the face of the oncoming wave of ponies. He saw immediately that Bell was done, that the bullet which had passed through the base of his neck had cut the main vessel.

Bell tried to stand. "Save yourselves!" he whispered. And then, "Take care of them, Merritt." It was the last thing he said. He was dead when they reached the rocks.

Merritt selected a spot for his base which was sheltered but not too cramped. They began to drag in the wounded. While he was working he heard the new attack collide fiercely with the first line.

There was a crescendo of hoofs which broke into a frantic, rhythmless stamping as the gunfire rose. Apaches gobbled their hideous war cries, and Mason's men shouted back every white man's curse that came to hand. The attack surged on through the first line, and then it collapsed and flowed back.

They left nearly a score of warriors on the ground, but they had mauled the Fourth badly, and they had pinned them down without water and with only half their horses.

Half-suffocated by the weight of fear and anticipated fear, Merritt worked desperately among the stunned and bleeding men. What terrified him seemed to be not what was happening, but what might happen.

BY FOUR o'clock, the patrol had withstood three more lunges that pushed them farther back against the cliff. Owl Head seemed content to let his men lie in the brush and sharpshoot with their superior weapons, stolen from supply trains.

Bullet shock had worn off and the dozen men in Merritt's field hospital were forgetting they were soldiers and remembering that they were men, in trouble and in pain. They cried for water, they sobbed, and they cursed. He had done all he could.

Once Mason came through the rocks to speak to the men. Merritt asked him what their chance was of breaking out of the trap. "I never talk about a fight until its over," the captain said brusquely. Then he added: "I'm counting on that paymaster's train for a lot more than money, though."

Sundown was painting the desert and the mountains beyond it. The men began to talk of what might come after dark. They seemed to fear most that the Indians would climb the cliff and roll boulders down on them.

Then Merritt saw the captain working back to the horses. Through the rocks filtered fifteen or twenty others. The movement attracted renewed firing; still they kept on, until he saw them standing ready to mount. All at once he heard Mason's shouted: "Ho!"

He watched them pour down the hillside as the rest of the troop slashed the sagebrush with their fire. He tried to follow the strategy, and finally saw that it was to turn the right flank of Owl Head's line back toward the canyon. If he could do that, his whole line could swing like a closing door, forcing the Apaches back into the blind canyon from which they had come, or force them to break up.

For a moment Merritt thought they were going to achieve it. He came to his feet, shouting, and at that moment the captain himself lurched in the saddle, two hundred feet down the slope, and slumped heavily to the ground. The charge wilted. Without his saber at the head, it was an arrow without a point. The men sprawled into the rocks and brush between the blue line at the foot of the cliff and the brush forest crawling with Indians. They hugged the ground while the fire whipped the creosote brush and ricocheted off the sand.

They were pinned down like a rabbit surrounded by hounds, and they were likely to remain there.

Merritt could see them, lying flat on the ground, trying to help Captain Mason. They had his tunic off and were holding a handkerchief against his shoulder. They glanced up at him several times, and at last a corporal shouted: "Doctor Merritt!"

Merritt risked exposing himself to shout back: "Is he badly hurt?"

"He's losing a lot of blood, sir! Can we stop it?"

Merritt hesitated. "Wait a minute," he called. "I'm coming down."

He heard the corporal protest, and felt the glances of the men near him; the tired, bearded, dirty, bloody men whose lives were his chattels.

He put what he needed in his pocket and lingered a moment beside the rock; then he was running down the slope with long strides of his lean legs. He fell, once, and it was well that he did, for it threw the painted marksmen off-balance. He crawled up and sprinted on.

Mason was suffering slightly from shock, but the wound was clean, the cleaner for his having bled well; Merritt finished with it in a few minutes. As he put his canteen to the captain's lips, he heard shouting among the rocks of the cliff, and then a bugle sang distantly.

Captain Mason let his head fall back with a deep sigh. He said: "That bugler from Fort Lowell never hit a round note in his life. But I never heard the charge blown sweeter!"

THEY bivouacked on the desert that night, and in the crisp dawn started back to the fort. Merritt rode in one of the ambulances. He did what he could for the men. He no longer worried about the things he could not do. Yet he felt closer to them than he had ever felt to anyone. There was no kinship in the world greater than having faced death with a man.

He had found the thing Bell had found. It was something that could be found only in battle, and it was as impossible to describe as to explain why a bugle gave a man gooseflesh. You could call it self-confidence, but that was only the skeleton of it. He decided he must be careful or he would become as arrogant and unfeeling as Bell had been.

At the same time, he was thinking that he would see about getting a uniform to wear. Without insignia, of course, and quite plain. But something to keep anyone from mistaking him for a civilian.

Beware the Pitchfork Pistoleers!

Smashing Cow Country Saga

Dan Sutton was cowman from Stetson brim to boot-heel, and fighter from iron guts to rock-hammer fists. . . . Yet when nesters swooped down like a swarm of deadly locusts to destroy his golden cattle empire, Sutton held back his kin at pistol-point . . . to lose the range he'd gladly give his life to keep!

They passed the wagons and followed in the wake of the red destruction.

CHAPTER ONE

Too Damned Many Nesters!

"DAN SUTTON," said Sam Langdon and reined in grimly. "You've been taken in. We've all been taken in."

Sutton—tall, rawboned, thin-lipped—kept the sturdy buckskin in check under him as his eyes surveyed the landscape, while the others, Seth Walker, Henry McNeil and his own brother Bert came up to form a half circle about him. He tried to keep control of himself. "Easy, Sam," he said crisply. "Don't count the heads

By VAN CORT

till you got the corral filled and sold."

Bert, much younger and quicker of tongue than the others, snapped, "Looks pretty damned filled to me. We look pretty damned sold, too."

Dan bit his lip. No one laughed. A murmur went through the score of riders following them. At last Henry McNeil broke the silence, his freckled face filled with storm clouds. Self-reproaching sarcasm dripped from his tongue: "So the good Colonel Moran didn't think much of the homestead act? Said it would never mean anything here?"

They had all been away from Langford and vicinity on a two-month trail drive. Now approaching home they were witnessing the bitter sight of three times the number of nester and homesteader shacks. Where the homesteading on the government grazing lands before had been merely a nuisance, a thorn in the eye, and an occasional problem where water rights were concerned, it was now a menace. It appeared as if the cattle country overnight had turned into farm country. As if the plodding migration of sodbusters from the East were truly pressing the free and raw cattle empire.

In this border region between one way of life and another, between the saddle and the plow, was one era passing? Was another, one less free, less romantic, beginning?

Seth Walker's gunhand trembled. He spat across the pommel. "Never thought I'd live to see it."

The five men, leaders of this part of the country's cattle business, faced the East grimly. But hadn't they all deep down inside dreamed and feared that this very thing would happen someday? Could they stop it?

Such were Dan Sutton's thoughts. They all looked to him for leadership. A gall of violence rose in him as he sat there. It was Evans Moran who had lulled his fears with: "This is cattle and grass country, Dan—it'll never be farms. Without the long grasses the soil is too loose. Don't worry."

Now they had, in the last hour, ridden past a section of Moran's land set in cotton, another full one in wheat. All around the Moran ranges, settlers had crowded and popped up like mushrooms. Along the rich river flats, which they all used, but which by silent agreement were more or less controlled by Moran, an army of men seemed to plod and till, plow and seed, seemingly struggling to change the age-old appearance of the earth.

"That two-faced old horn owl is the slickest number ever filled a pair of pants," said Langdon eventually. He suddenly lost his composure and went purple. His six-shooter came out and flashed in the sun in a road-agent's spin. "Calls for bellies full of lead, in my language."

Three solemn Amens rose on the air.

"Easy," said Dan almost sharply. "Easy does it."

"Yeah, I remember," Langdon went on. "You were the one who agreed with Moran to let the steaders be, to let them think they were set, and *then* root them out. And you got us to ride along with you."

There was a moment's silence, then Dan Sutton spoke: "Then listen to me now. I say this is still cattle country, and it always will be. Or I'm a dead man." And he picked up his reins and rode forward without a word.

LATER, this tall man drove his tall horse down the wide street of Langford; bitter distaste was in his mouth. He glanced coldly at the ungainly, squat clodhoppers that now crowded the sidewalks of this town of his, their horny hands swinging stiffly, many of them clad shamelessly in bib overalls.

With contempt he saw that they carried no guns on their hips. But perhaps they were shrewd in this. There might be

shotguns and rifles hidden in wagons or behind plows and grainsacks, but these ones did not understand the open raw challenge of a loose-holstered pistol under ready fingers. That custom of this country they were alien to.

Sutton rode high above them, proud like a ship upon a sea. He wondered where this multitude came from, if there was ever an end to them. Out of the East somewhere, where sold cattle went.

They came singly or in groups, with their heavy wagons, their hungry-looking women and the snotnosed, mewling babes. And that awful, persistent, doggedly irritating patience was on their faces. They'd claim land they had never helped to conquer; they'd homestead, pushing in behind a law they had brought from somewhere else—the homestead act.

There were, as if by some silent agreement, fewer farmers about the center section of Main street, where the Longhorn Hotel stood shoulder to shoulder with the Cattlemen's Bank, facing Ackerman's Emporium and O'Sullivan's Saloon. These were places that could and did still roar lustily and with the right kind of noise on Saturday nights.

On the other side of the hotel were Moore's old harness shop and Bennett's Livery. "But it's an island almost," Sutton thought now; "too damned much of an island, a cattleman's sanctuary in this clodbuster-polluted town."

He drove the buckskin up to the hotel rail and sat in the saddle, biting the end of a cheroot with contemplative violence. Impending struggle seemed to cast its dark shadows over him. How many men killed in these streets? How much bloodshed?

He looked up from his smoke and saw Colonel Evans Moran on the hotel gallery. Uncontrolled contempt rode his voice as he called: "Hello, farmer."

Moran, white-haired, redfaced, slim, opened one eye at Sutton over the flame he was applying to a Havana. If the contemptuous tone and insulting word hit him, he did not let on. "Why, hello Dan." He waved the match dead and dropped it.

"A section in wheat," said Dan then, "a section in cotton. Barb wire all over hell and gone. Did you say once that this was cattle land and always would be?"

The older man felt the whip of Sutton's tongue now, but he controlled himself. He even managed to smile. "Dan, I pride myself on being progressive. Perhaps we should study the trend of the times."

"You changed your outlook damned quick, Colonel."

Moran said with an attempted touch of humor, "Maybe we have to learn quick when we get old, Dan; or not at all."

It was incredible that these two had once been good friends, yet Moran tried to put a good face on it. Dan Sutton's voice shook: "You want to see this land

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all fenced in; barb wire after barb wire? A man having to open a damned gate every mile he rides? What have you been drinking? Is that you talking or somebody else?"

Evans Moran purpled slightly. He rolled the cigar between his fingers and sucked in his lips. A gunbutt bulged under his neat gray coat skirt. At least he was still cattleman to that extent. He pointed the smoke at Dan. "We'll all see it. Yes, I think we will all see it. As I said: Study the trend of the times."

Sutton's gunhand tensed. Trend of the times, hell. There was politics smelling beneath this. Moran and that farm-leader Mallard were cooking this up. He said, patting his gunbutt slowly, "This trend is good enough for me, colonel. You study *this* trend."

Evans Moran wet his lips. "Easy, Dan, easy. Even that trend will pass."

"Not in *my* day."

The colonel still chose to smile; obviously he had not expected to be confronted by Dan here in public, with friend and foe looking on and listening in. He made his voice pleasantly patronizing: "Ah, Dan, now you sound a little too much like your brother Bert. We must grow up with the country."

SUTTON'S dark eyes flashed. Why not kill this mild and smooth-faced turncoat now and have it done with. But control came to him; an instinct called for a cool brain. This sudden farm tidal wave was too big for rash action. He said, "Bert's beginning to sound all right to me. At least a man knows what Bert is. But what are you—cattleman or farmer? Frankly I'll spit on a man who don't know his own side of the fence!"

And he spat, expertly, a stream of tobacco-chew from his smoke, landing it squarely and splattering between the colonel's highly polished boots.

An almost audible gasp came from the slowly widening circle of onlookers. How much would a man take? Moran lost some of his color; he tensed and stood by the gallery post like a steel-spring, almost young-looking. Could he shoot faster and steadier than a man on horseback?

When he at last spoke, his voice was but a loud whisper, and he managed a sickly smile: "I wouldn't take those words from anyone but you, Dan Sutton." He turned and walked off the gallery, stiff and white, reached for the reins of the two reds before the buckboard and climbed in.

Sutton, on the other hand, dismounted and hitched, calmly, as if nothing had occurred.

"Just a moment, father. Dan!"

He looked up and met a pair of deep blue, warm eyes; the hair was rich mahogany, the firm and finely shaped oval face belonged to a full-blown woman. A slender gloved hand was thrust at him and he took it mechanically. "Elinor, I'll be—"

She cocked her head to one side and another and laughed easily. "You look just the same, Dan—not a pound lighter or heavier, not a day older; and just as grave as ever."

"But *you* have changed."

"For better or worse?"

His hard face cracked into a smile. "You guess. Home from Philadelphia for good now?"

She had been a skinny teen-age girl when he saw her last. Five years had brought some astonishing changes; he stood there and forgot she was the daughter of his old friend and new enemy. She nodded eagerly at him.

"For quite a while anyhow. All depends." She said then, "But Langford has changed, hasn't it?" Her brows knit. "All these bib overalls and plows. Why, in the old days, no self-respecting man would be seen walking down the street of Langford without a gun on his hip. I'm

not so sure that I like much of it now."

"I know *I* don't."

"Father does." She spread her hands in a deprecating gesture. "The country *is* changing, Dan."

"Too many things are changing, Elinor."

Colonel Moran cleared his throat loudly and she moved off the hotel steps and toward the buckboard. Sutton followed her, handing her up.

"You must ride over and have a visit, Dan."

He said nothing to that, and she wrinkled her brow in puzzlement. She looked to her father, who was brusquely backing the reds out into the roadway and turning them in the deep dust.

"How is Bert?"

"Bert is fine. I must tell him you are home."

The rig moved away and he stood rooted to the spot for several minutes, a swirl of conflicting emotions tornadoing in his mind. To discover Elinor Moran, now, like this.

CHAPTER TWO

The Thompson Cavalry

NOW, as he walked up the street in search of his brother, the town suddenly pressed him more than ever before. Even here in the cattleman's section farmers today crowded the sidewalks. He saw Jan Mallard surrounded by a group of homesteaders. It was obvious that Mallard had witnessed his altercation with the colonel, and that in his dour heavy way he was satisfied.

Not rich, Mallard was nevertheless a leader. He knew law, knew the homesteaders' rights, and they followed his advice when trouble came up. More than once he had held violence in check. He was a friend of Moran's; had been asked to the Moran ranch several times. Oh, yes, Sutton knew now, politics were the colonel's line all right. Well, they would change this cattle country over his dead body.

He spied his brother, just as Bert deliberately walked through Mallard's group, shouldering Mallard out of the way. Mallard, his foot stepped on, could not restrain a: "Couldn't you look where you're going, Sutton?"

Bert Sutton—young, wild-looking, his hat carried insolently on the back of his head, an eager chip on each shoulder—turned with a tigerish smile. He threw an unprintable insult at the farmer. "Why'nt you stay home where you belong, sodbusters!"

He waited for a reaction. Alone, Mallard might have let it pass; but there were too many friends about him. He walked slowly across to Bert Sutton. "That's enough, Sutton." He pointed to the other's gun. "Got guts enough to take that thing off? I don't carry one."

Bert's smile was an insult. "You mean *you* haven't guts enough to carry one." But he unbuckled his gunbelt and handed it to a friend who suddenly had come up behind him. "All right, come on, sodbuster."

This thing had happened even too suddenly for Dan. The street was a smoking powderkeg, and this coming fight the spark that would set it off. Dan Sutton cursed as the crowd surged past him to see the fight. Suddenly, above the many heads, he caught a glimpse of Elinor Moran and her father in the buckboard, crowded against Coltrane's law-office building. The girl was standing up, her lips drawn tight.

Colonel Moran was sawing on the reins, trying to get the reds backed away and turned out of the crowd that hemmed them in, but Elinor's voice came to Dan's ear: "No, no, Dad; I must see this."

Dan Sutton found a doorstep and saw Jan Mallard, lips cut and nose bleeding,

waiting patlently while Bert danced agilely around him, lashing piston-like blows at the heavy face. Mallard knew little about fist-fighting, but tried vainly to grasp hold of his opponent. Once he succeeded he would be able to inflict considerable harm.

Bert sprang forward, slamming his fist into the farmer's eye, rocking the big man against an awning post, his head snapping back. A wild murmur of approval went up from the rancher section of the audience while the homesteaders looked at each others.

"Get him, cowboy. Get him! Get him!"

Bert darted in again and planted a blow to the other's jaw. Mallard was sitting down on the edge of the boardwalk now, shaking his head dully. As Bert stepped back, he got to his feet and came forward, lurching, arms apart, ready to grapple. One eye was closed and blood ran from his face in streams, dripping its scarlet pearls in the white dust. But on he came like a tough ox.

Bert, slightly winded, his face wrought with impatience, stepped nimbly in again, applying a one-two. Mallard's head went down, but this time he caught one of Bert's arms. In another moment he had his opponent by the waist, crushed him fiercely for a second. Then, whipping his legs off the ground, he threw him like a ragdoll.

A sickening sensation went through Dan Sutton's innards. Every time his brother tried to rise, Mallard, swift as a bear, was upon him, lifted him and crashed him to the ground or the boardwalk again. Sutton felt his fingers grip his pistol butt. Bert was on his feet again, limp, groggy, desperate determination in his eyes. And once more the huge bear of a man was upon him, lifting him, smacking him down.

"Stand back," somebody called. "Give the kid a chance. What kind of a fight is this?"

A roar went up from the crowd—here and there men were beginning to maul each other and shove. Hitched saddle mounts squealed and tore at their reins. Bert got to his knees and Mallard stood over him, ready to grasp and crush once more before he threw him.

"Stop it, somebody! Stop it!"

It was Elinor Moran's voice. But no one paid any heed. Then Bert Sutton was all at once on his feet. But this time Mallard did not pounce. Bert, in rising, had snatched a six-shooter from the holster of a bystander.

MALLARD paled, chewed on something to say but did not say it. Bert looked too wild. Men began scrambling the circle wider. "Get out of the way. Make room." The hammer cocked with a click.

How he got there Dan did not know, but he found himself confronting his brother, his back to Mallard. "Get out of the way, Dan," whispered the kid savagely. "I mean to finish him. Beat it, I tell you!"

"Give me that gun, Bert."

"Hell and damnation, no!" Bert tried to get around him but his brother blocked the way. Mallard had not moved from the spot.

Dan reached forward then and took the weapon by the barrel. There was a gasp from the crowd; then he had it and grasped his brother by the shoulder, turning him around. "Come on, Bert; let's get out of here." His voice was controlled, but his grip was iron. He began walking Bert out of the crowd, making it look as if Bert came willingly.

"Let me kill him," said Bert between his teeth.

"Quiet. Not this time. Not like this."

As Dan Sutton pushed Bert through the swingdoor of O'Sullivan's, he glanced back and saw that Mallard was having the good sense to shoo the homesteaders out of the street fast. Moran was finally

getting the buckboard through the crowd and Elinor was seeking Dan with a last glance. He knew he would want to see her again.

In the backroom Bert collapsed over a table, clawing for the whiskey O'Sullivan was eagerly pouring him. "Broke a rib," he gasped, gulping the liquor. "That damned farmer." Color left him suddenly and tears of rage came to his eyes. "Why did you do it, Dan? Why did you do it?"

Sam Langdon stepped up and grabbed him before he rolled to the floor. Henry McNeil and Seth Walker, behind Bert, looked angrily to Dan. "You should have let him kill that clod-kicker. We've got to start this thing *some* time. Why not now?"

Dan looked from one face to the next as a few more of his friends began crowding into the room. "For one thing it would have been plain murder," he said curtly.

Bert coughed on his whiskey and drank again. "He asked for it," he said hoarsely from his chair.

Dan Sutton kept studying them. Firebrands, dynamite on horseback—they'd fight, throw everything away in one grand battle, if not kept in check. He shook his head slowly when Sam Langdon spoke up:

"You were wrong, Dan, to follow Moran's advice, letting the homesteaders get set before we rooted them out. We've been tolerating them when we should have run them out—even killed a few of them to show 'em. Now we have a war on our hands. What were you waiting for? For the farm vote to get strong enough?"

"There's more to this than meets the eye," said Dan, remembering how satisfied the colonel had looked watching the street fight. "There's a reason for everything. We have the homestead law to reckon with. Let's be long-headed in whatever we do."

NOW the girls ask BOB for dates
WE JUST COOKED UP A SURPRISE PARTY FOR PEG TONIGHT! BOB, CAN YOU TAKE ME?
SURE, GIVE ME A SEC TO GET READY!
WISH JOAN ASKED ME, BOB. YOU ALWAYS WERE LUCKY.
WHY DON'T YOU CHANGE YOUR LUCK THE WAY I DID?
I ALWAYS USE LIFEBUOY—THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O.—CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT. LIFEBUOY EVERY DAY SURE KEEPS B.O. AWAY!
THIS SURPRISE PARTY WAS FUN, BOB—THANKS FOR TAKING ME.
THANKS FOR ASKING ME, JOAN...
AND THANKS TO LIFEBUOY!
MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH IS THE ONE BEST WAY TO GET LASTING ALL-OVER PROTECTION AGAINST B.O. USE LIFEBUOY FOR A WEEK AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!
Used in the homes of 40 million Americans
LIFEBUOY HEALTH SOAP
ANOTHER FINE LEVER PRODUCT

"Yes, but not too long-winded," said Bert sharply.

"What I'm interested in," said Dan, "is where all these settlers get their backing to buy seeds and tools. Most of them, especially these last ones who came in when we were away, looked like they never had a dime to their names before, and never expect to."

"And what I'm interested in," snapped Bert, the humiliation of the fight still scorching him, "is—how soon do we throw them the hell out of here. Let's have some action, less talk."

The others crowded eagerly around Bert, patting him on the shoulder, commenting on his good fight. Henry McNeil was pulling Bert's shirt off and looking at his hurt; he called to Sean O'Sullivan for something to make a strap-bandage of. Dan stood thoughtfully by, watching them. He wondered what the street would look like by now, if that pistol had been fired. It would have suited these men fine . . . but what was the matter with *him*? Was he getting so old that he thought of consequences rather than the things he wanted to fight for?

He turned out into the street and saw now that most of the homesteaders were drifting out of town, their wagons cutting up clouds of dust at either end of main street. At the horse trough by the small square a huge figure was busy dousing his face and chest with cold water. Even bleeding and battered there was something impressive about Jan Mallard. Unlike Bert Sutton, he stood alone, tending to himself, no admiring crowd about him. He had sent his men where he thought they should be—away from trouble.

"Well, it damned near popped that time, didn't it?"

Sutton whirled to meet the grinning face of a huge man loitering against the Cattleman's Bank. He was well-dressed, but sloppy, wearing a three-day black beard and an insolent brace of horn-handled guns, thigh-strapped. Sutton resented at once the inquisitive, insinuating gleam in the brown eyes. "How was that?" he inquired coldly.

The man laughed again, spat across the rail. "Ain't I got eyes? The great war between the plow and the saddle. Say, you're Sutton, ain't you?"

"Can't deny it."

"You remember me, Bull Thompson. At the Red River roundup three years ago."

Sutton placed the man then. Thompson was a professional roundup man; with his crew, called the Thompson Cavalry, he hired himself out as trail-driver, and general trouble-shooter. Some said his services were of doubtful value, that trouble-*maker* would be closer to the mark. Surrounding himself with a score of rough-looking renegades, Thompson operated through several states, acting often as a mercenary commander of cattle and range wars, hiring himself out to the highest bidder.

"I remember you," said Sutton non-committally, recalling that after the Red River roundup there had been a sizeable herd of unbranded cattle missing, and a couple of unexplained killings. He made as if to be on his way.

Unperturbed by the coldness, Thompson grinned amicably. "Sutton," he said, "You're going to have your hands full here when it does pop." He made a gesture with his head, "I know a lot of boys who'd just love to take a hand in keeping the range for cattle. Never had no love for a sodbuster myself." Bull Thompson spat again. "Never saw a cowtown so damned full of 'em as this one."

The thought prodded Sutton. If trouble did come, a decisive victory gained by superiority in numbers, might do much to influence public opinion. As if the guerilla leader was guessing his thoughts, he said: "We make a little deal. We do most of

the dirty fighting. Then we vamoose, taking most of the blame with us, leaving you sitting pretty. You know, friend, it has been done before."

SOMETHING in the huge man's brazen, insinuating manner, grated against something in Sutton. A small group of riders came out of Ackerman's Emporium across the street and hailed Thompson casually; they were slightly drunk. Sutton recognized the unmistakable marks of owlhooters and gallows-bait. The expensive, but dirty clothes; each man wearing two guns, the swaggering, yet furtive demeanor.

Bands like these had infested the country ever since Quantrell established the tradition after the war between the states. He knew what the deal would be: the privilege to pillage herds for a while. Thompson and his men driving the cattle over the state line to ready buyers. "It is ever thus," he reflected, "where honest men fight always come those who would profit by shed blood."

Flint came to his tone, though he sounded casual enough, "I guess the answer is no, Thompson. Thanks for the offer, though." And he swung away from the other to continue, not, however, missing the suddenly vanished smile and the abrupt gleam of steel that came into the brown eyes.

"It's a smart hombre who knows where his friends are, Sutton."

Mallard was putting his shirt back on as Sutton passed the trough. Dan made a point of ignoring the man, till the homesteader halted him: "A moment, Sutton."

The cattleman wheeled and stood tall and lean on the boardwalk, looking down at the bearish hulk by the trough. "Yes?"

Mallard straightened up, a sheepish expression on his battered features, yet he was not without his pride. "I guess I figger maybe I owe you a thank-you."

Sutton was ready to walk on. "You owe me nothing, Mallard. Not a thing."

"For saving my life." There was no humor in Mallard's tone. "I heard the angels sing. Your brother's a wildcat."

"He's a cattleman," said Sutton stiff-lipped. "I was saving *him* from doing something ill-timed, not you."

Mallard buttoned the last button in his shirt and reached for his coat. A faint shadow of a smile flickered on his face. "Thanks anyway; you saved several men's lives by putting your guts in front of that gun. There would have been blood in the streets if you hadn't."

Sutton turned slowly on his heel, working hard at disliking this heavy, imperturbable man. "There probably will be," he said.

Mallard laid both hands on the rail between them. "Need not. We came out here to make our homes and living. We *have* to." Mallard's voice was suddenly strung with eagerness. "We want to live in peace. Do we have to fight? The country is big, Mr. Sutton."

"Maybe it's big enough, but you're in the wrong section of it."

Mallard shrugged and spread his hands. "Look, you ranchers don't need all that government grazing range; we don't need it all either. We could share the waterholes. We could make agreements."

He stopped as Dan slowly shook his head from side to side. "You don't settle this thing by talk, Mr. Mallard," he said with slow, painful emphasis. "This is grassland, cattle land. Homestead it and plow it all up, and the wind will run your topsoil into the sky and carry it away. You watch for that wind, mister.

"One farm or two might do here and there, but the way you fellows have come in lately will ruin the country forever. No, this is cattle country first, last, and always. You'll plow it up over my dead body, Mr. Mallard!"

He had spoken thin-lipped and wooden-faced, with no show of emotion; he

noticed that the words had their impact on the other. Mallard grew thoughtful behind his stony, bland face. His deep eyes looked worried, though he tried to cover it up.

"Anybody can file a homestead claim," Sutton drove home. "It takes money, good stake money, for tools and seed and grub to get started. Where do all these hard-scrapple, bone-skinny sharecroppers get theirs, Mr. Mallard? I suppose the Cattleman's Bank just opens up the till and says: Come help yourselves and to hell with collateral!"

Mallard's eyes veiled; he was plainly stirred. "Must a man be looked down on because he is poor?" he said defensively.

"No," said Dan sharply, a huge thought suddenly growing in him. "And that's not my point. But when a lot of poor nobodies suddenly move in and make trouble, it's worth knowing who they're in hock to."

"I'm sorry we can't talk about this," said Mallard. "I was trying to be friendly. It's a good thing to know who your friends are, I guess."

"A very good thing, Mr. Mallard." And Dan turned his back on the man and walked away. Yet as he rode homeward, what disturbed him was that there was no hatred in him for the big clumsy man. Mallard had his viewpoint, and he had his. They could not get together, but Dan felt a reluctant respect for the man's sincerity.

CHAPTER THREE

Smoke from the Powderkeg

ENTERING his yard he saw Sam Langdon's, McNeil's and Walker's horses at the rail. Inside the house they were surrounding Bert, who was in an armchair in front of a fire in the living room. They all put down their tumblers of bourbon and faced Dan Sutton.

"We been doing some figuring," said Burt. "We can—"

"A moment," said Dan sternly, reaching for bottle and glass. "Can you wait till a man gets a drink?" His glance raked the four men as he put the tumbler to his lips. There was open dissatisfaction and impatience in their eyes; he felt his leadership threatened.

"As I was saying," Bert went on aggressively. "We've just figured out our man-power. From these—the four biggest ranches in the valley—we can count on ninety-eight mounted rifles all told. From Glen's, the Bar T, and the rest of the smaller outfits there may be about forty men more. If we organize and move fast we can finish this business in two or three days."

Dan nodded coolly. "And how many do you think the sodbusters'll have?"

There was a small silence, then Walker said, "Between three and four hundred, Dan; if they get roused."

"And you don't think they'll get roused?"

Bert laughed choppily. "They won't get a chance. We aim to ride down on them in a body, move fast. We'll pull all their fences down, rout them out of their shacks, burn their seed and tools. We'll haze them out of the country, keep 'em moving like Sheridan did the Indians in Texas."

"No warning."

"No sir," said Bert sharply. "Can't afford to. We waited too long, Dan. You let Moran bamboozle you; now you see which way the wind blows. It's us or them, Dan. Don't you see? We got to act. And we'll clean the colonel's river flats out first."

There was eager decision in Bert. The others nodded. Bert, just twenty-three, was the center of the group now. "By the way, Bull Thompson's Cavalry is in town," Sam Langdon said then, weightily. "It would be a handy force to have

as an ace in the hole. I was talking to him."

Dan's voice cut sharply through the room. "I have been talking to Bull Thompson too. I told him the answer was no. We're not having any renegade owl-hooters doing our dirty work. Also we're not running out any homesteaders without warning. I agree we're running them out, but we'll blow the bugle when we come, or not at all." His glance, hard and icy, took in each man. "Is that clear?"

Silence met him; he was a powerful figure in that moment, virile, forceful, dangerous. In the final analysis these others relied on him to lead, and he knew it. Eventually Langdon tried to chuckle good-naturedly, "All right, all right, Dan, if that's the way you feel—"

Bert would not give up. "But you're wrong, Dan. You're getting too damned old in your ways. *You*'re the one who's been letting this thing ride on too long."

Sutton finished his glass and moved toward the dining room door. His tone was fatherly, patronizing. "Listen, youngster. I saved you today from committing plain murder in front of witnesses. Where the hell do you think you'd be this minute if I hadn't?" He opened the door and swung out of the room. "Excuse me, gents. I haven't had my dinner yet."

As he closed the door behind him to call for the housekeeper he heard Bert's voice growling, prodding the others: "Give warning, hell! But leave it to big brother to want the last word. Well, I haven't had *my* last word with Mallard yet!"

DAN awoke from a light sleep shortly before midnight. From his brother's room he heard the sound of a boot being stomped lightly against the floor. As he entered the hall, he saw Bert headed for the front door, and faced him with a suppressed oath.

"Going someplace, Bert?"

"Buck tells me Mallard is still in town. What's it to you?"

Dan said through thin lips, "Plenty. I want you to keep your powder dry."

The younger man moved toward the door. Dan saw that he winced with pain, but tried to cover it up. "I'm sick of your nurse-maiding, Dan. This is between Mallard and me." Humiliation and rage cooked behind the wild eyes. "I'll show that plow-driver what he can do to me. I'll show him."

"You already did, Bert," said Sutton quietly. "You're still hurt. Only a fool would go out in your condition looking for trouble. Besides," he spaced the words, "*I'm* running this war. *I'll* give the word."

This was typical of his problem, he reflected. They were all like Bert. Being fatherless and motherless, and twelve years older than Bert, he had practically brought him up. His impatience was tempered with something deeper than mere anger.

"You're getting too damned old to run *any* war, Dan. We want action. We want those farmers tossed out. Now!"

Spark the powder keg at the wrong time and you jump the gun and lose all.

"Stand away from that door, Bert. Go back to your bed and get some sleep. You need it."

Bert's face was incredulous. "You crazy? You can't order me around like a child. I'm looking for Mallard." He reached for the door handle.

"You heard me."

"Go to hell!"

There was suddenly powdersmoke drifting in the dimly-lit hall. . . .

Two minutes later Bill Taff, the foreman, crossed the yard breathlessly and knocked on and opened the front door. He looked up at Dan, standing on the low landing at the end of the hall. "I heard a shot. What happened?"

"Nothing, Bill." Sutton wiggled a gun

in his hand. "I was fooling with this old revolver and it popped off. Go back to your bed. . . ."

In the morning Dan reined up before Colonel Moran's gallery. The older man, coming to the door on his hail, kept a cautious hand near his gun, but put on a bland, friendly expression. He said flatly, yet with a tone that invited compromise and patching up, "Well, Dan?"

"Just a word of notice, colonel, for old time's sake. You started this homestead tolerance. You were the first man to put up with it here in the valley. All right, we're cleaning out your river flats for a start."

The older man relaxed a bit, then shrugged. "Sorry to hear it, Dan. If you think you can stop this thing, if you think you can buck the times—"

"What I want to know: Do I shoot at your riders or not? Where do you stand?"

Evans Moran raised his hands in some sort of supplication. "Leave me out of it. I tell you I see the signs of the times. I want no part of bloodshed. No, Dan, I'll have to stay on the fence. I won't buck fate."

Acid distaste filled Sutton's mouth; he was about to spit again, but thought better of it. "You understand, when this thing is over there'll be no grazing on the river flats for the E bar M." And he wheeled the horse and rode off.

"Have it your way, Dan." The tone somehow sounded faintly mocking.

Sutton made no answer. Passing the corner of the house his thoughts went to Elinor and he almost admitted to himself that her attraction as well as his sense of code had brought him here. But it was of no use to think of her, and he decided to shove such thoughts from his mind.

SUDDENLY something unusual caught his attention. In one of the smaller corrals trotted a couple of horses not carrying the E bar M brand that he knew so well. They were fast, sleek, blooded horses, one of them had a Mexican road-brand. Riding past without letting on that he saw them, his guess somehow went to Bull Thompson's Cavalry; then he shook this thought off. What would Bull Thompson be doing in the camp of a man who favored the homestead cause?

When he had almost passed out of Moran's owned ranges and saw the former government grasslands on the river flats to his right, he heard sharply trotting hoofbeats behind him. He looked back. His heart beat faster as Elinor Moran paced her mount stirrup to stirrup with his.

Jeans and boots and a dun shirt did nothing to detract from her loveliness. She rode with long-accustomed ease. "Good morning, Dan."

He forced a smile. "I'm sorry to see you," he said.

It quickened his pulses that she seemed to understand at once. She gave him a short silence, then said, "What's wrong between you and Dad?"

They were topping a hillock on the range line and he pulled up and pointed to the string of nester's layouts along the flats. "Your father plays a funny game of cards. As a partner he has been bidding me up for a long time, only to let me down. He's suddenly turned farmer on us. This is cattle land, and it always will be."

"You believe that?"

"As long as I can ride a horse and use a gun."

She said after a moment, "And you're sure you're right and Dad is wrong?"

"It was your father's idea to let the homesteaders get set, and then rout them out once and for all. Now I come home from a trail drive and find a farmer sheriff, a half-farmer town council." He finished abruptly, "But it's nothing for you and me to talk about. We're cleaning

these flats out tomorrow. That's what I came to give him warning about."

His face grew stony; bitter regret tore at him. He touched his hatbrim and prepared to ride off. "Dan," she said gravely. And he felt his fingers check the horse automatically.

"Because your wildcat brother and Mallard had a fist-fight yesterday—is it to be open war?"

"There's more behind it than that, and you know it. This is cattle land; this thing had been riding on too long. I was fooled."

"If you believe in war, why did you stop Bert from killing Mallard? Why do you bother to give warning?"

"Bert's action would have been ill-timed."

"It wouldn't be because of your sense of fairness and justice?"

He shrugged and made his glance hard, and she said: "Mallard and his kind don't move too easily. They have to live, too. And they have the law on their side."

"I didn't bring them here," he said irritably, and spurred his horse on. "The homestead law was made somewhere else."

Immediately she spurred after him. "Ever stop to think that you'll be outlaws if you carry this war through?"

"Is it being an outlaw to fight for your land and your way of living?"

But this time she leaned over and laid hand on his bridle and he stopped his mount. "Wait," she said, and there was strong plea in her voice. "Why buck fate, Dan? Why not wait for the wind?"

There was a fine flush on her cheeks, an intense light in her eyes as they gravely searched his. Their horses swung around, shoulder to shoulder, facing their riders. He was suddenly filled with wonder about her. "What do you mean, the wind?" he asked mechanically.

"A few years ago—I guess I was just fifteen or so—Dad took me once riding out to the section overlooking Buffalo Neck bend on the river. He showed me where a man had once tried plowing up the whole section, setting it to wheat. But in the fall the northwestern came and blew the topsoil into the river. The place was eroded by wind and rain; mostly by wind. I recall Dad saying that you could never plow the grassland up in this part of the country."

"I know the place," said Dan, and added: "*He* said that?"

"Maybe he's changed his mind now, maybe he has learned different. Funny, isn't it? But I remember him so distinctly saying: 'But anyone, girlie, who knows that fact and uses it right, can make his fortune; can put this valley in the hollow of his hand some day.' "

THOUGHTS raced through Sutton's brain; he bit his lip. "Strange words. So you want me to wait for the wind to break the sodbusters? I guess I'd be an old man if I waited. I'll not let them ruin my cattle land in the process."

"Why spill blood over it?"

"Maybe it's worth it."

"No, never, never," she said excitedly. "Dan, promise me you won't start this war, that you won't do anything hasty or foolish. I—I couldn't bear it—" She was suddenly blushing furiously.

A tornado of wild emotions went through him. He tried to be calm, to make his voice even. "But why all this concern? Why all this heart-felt, good advice?"

"Because even when I was just a little skinny kid I admired you—when you never even knew I existed. You didn't notice me, but to me you were—"

He leaned forward in the saddle; his deep voice said: "I notice you now. I guess I'll never stop noticing you."

She was in his arms, for a wild, long, unexpected moment, yet this was somehow not so great a surprise to him. "So it happened to you too, then," she mur-

mured, "when we met up yesterday?"

He straightened up in the saddle and released her. He said darkly, "Maybe it doesn't make much sense now, as things stand."

"I don't understand Dad," she said painfully, then grew silent. Some dark comprehension seemed to settle like a shadow over her face. "But why would—why would Dad—?"

"Why would he have a visit from Bull Thompson and his cavalry?" said Dan abruptly. "Was it some of their horses I saw in the small corral?"

She nodded. "He and some of his men were here last night for dinner. Dad asked them to spend the night." Her thoughts bewildered her now, and she grew silent.

Through his mind went: And he's a friend of Mallard's too. He almost spoke the words, but then he had another guess: Was Bull Thompson trying to sell his services to the highest-bidding side? Thompson was known for that. The powderkeg was smoking. In a war, if the homesteaders had Bull Thompson plus his Cavalry on their side a quick and decisive victory might be theirs. And Moran? He would be sitting pretty with a heavy farm vote.

On the other hand, would this be Mallard's way of doing things? He shook his head silently, and the girl studied him, gravely disturbed. He slowly began wheeling his horse away.

Immediately she shouldered her mount into his and laid her hand on his arm. "Promise me to do nothing rashly. There must be some other way to settle this than bloodshed and war." She added suddenly, "Perhaps you should be careful not to play the game your enemies want you to."

He held her hand in his and looked her in the eyes. "Meaning just what?" But at that she freed herself from his grip and wheeled her horse about. In another moment she was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wait for the Wind!

HE HAD ridden only a mile when he was aware of a sooty smear against the sky. A plume of smoke rose from one of the homesteads on the far bend of the river. "Fools," he thought. "Fools." Instinctively he spurred his horse forward. So they could not wait for his word, for his command.

It was a hostile group that confronted him when he reached the place. Mallard's house was a smoking ruin. Sacks of precious grain was still burning and in the midst of the smoking timbers of a small barn a new plowshare glowed cherry red, the wooden handles long gone to ashes. A milling crowd of settlers scurried past this symbol of destruction, trying to salvage from the ruins of the house what they could. A couple of scared and weeping women, surrounded by a flock of excited children, were huddled on a pile of broken furniture.

Several men picked up shotguns and belly-pointed them at Dan when he rode up. Only their astonishment at his presence and his iron calm kept them from firing.

"Who did this?"

A young farmer jiggled his shotgun and gave a hoarse laugh: "Listen to him ask." White-hot anger vibrated the man. He asked of the others, "Shall I give him both barrels?"

One of the women, her face drawn and haggard, had stood up from the group at the furniture. Sutton wheeled his horse toward her. He touched his hat briefly. "Ma'am, *you* tell me," he said curtly.

"A flock of riders came up from the river," she said. "An hour ago. They shot my husband in the back." She shook her head and buried her face in her hands before she could go on. "Then they made us get out and they—" She made a sweep-

ing gesture toward the black destruction.

The words came out of Sutton automatically, on pure reflex: "I'm very sorry, Ma'am, believe me. And Mr. Mallard?"

He could somehow not picture the stubborn, powerful Mallard dead. The picture jarred him queerly.

"They took him to town in a buckboard, to the doctor."

"That's taking a chance with a wounded man."

The man who had first spoken said: "Your brother did it. I saw his horse and his hat when they rode off. They had their faces covered. There were six of them. By God, mister, get out of here before I blow you to hell! Get out! If Jan never wakes up again we'll see that brother of yours swing!"

Sutton's eyes bored into the man. "Hold your fire, mister. Keep your powder dry. My brother never shot a man in the back."

"Says you! Listen, we wanted our rights peacefully. We wanted our living. But if you want us to fight, we can. There are plenty of us. God and the law are on our side. You can't scare us or stop us."

The rails in the cattle section of Langford were filled with ranch horses when Dan pulled up at the Longhorn Hotel. Out beyond, towards the ends of the street, the farmers crowded the sidewalks, filled the roadway with wagons and rigs. They far outnumbered the ranchers, Sutton saw, and many of them now carried their weapons openly.

They are still coming; there seemed no end to them. Dan's eyes took in the horses at the Longhorn rail and knew McNeil and Langdon and Walker were here among others. Riders crowded bars and sidewalks, no one missing his arrival. An expectant stir went through them.

"Well, it's boiling all right, Sutton."

He wheeled from the door to face Bull Thompson's grinning countenance. Several of his men loitered expectantly behind him, watching Dan eagerly. "There's an awful lot of them," Thompson went on with an insinuating grin, and rubbed his hands.

Sutton's eyes narrowed; he tried to penetrate the casual, too-grinning surface of the renegade leader. Was there some deeper purpose behind his presence here, just now? The man smelled strongly of Scotch whiskey, the kind only Moran used. What was the score? Was Thompson sniffing happily for war, like a professional mercenary troop commander?

Dan shrugged and was about to enter the hotel when Thompson touched his elbow. "I got thirty hands who'd love a little shootin' job. Plain or fancy, neatly done. You know us. Haven't changed your mind, have you?"

Sutton ran his glance over the multitude of milling farmers and back to Thompson. "I think not, Thompson," he said evenly and turned in to the hotel.

The other then slapped him familiarly and insolently on the shoulder and grinned again in utter friendliness for all to see. "I got lots of time, Sutton. I'll be around when you *do* change it."

IN AN ominous mood Sutton faced his friends inside the dark, huge oak-paneled barroom. Only ranchers were here today. There were grave faces, but they were somehow satisfied ones. Not a smile in the bunch though. As they all waited upon his word, Sam Langdon came forward. "I admit Bert and his bunch jumped the gun, Dan. But now it's done, it's maybe just as well."

Ice hung on Dan's words. "Is it?"

"I've been thinking," Langdon went on. "Most of the farmers are in town now. That's how stupid they are. If some of us could bottle them up here, maybe shoot some of their horsese from under them if we have to, we'd immobilize them. The rest of us could then clean out the homesteads in no time. What do you

think of that, Dan? Is that all right?"

"It may be good strategy, but I don't like it." He spoke slowly and concisely. "There'll be mostly women and children on the places, living in tents and shacks. I said we'll blow our bugle when we come, and we will. We start tomorrow morning, after rendezvous-ing at my ranch. Is that understood?"

A hush fell on the room; they all stared at him open-mouthed. A hoarse whisper came from Seth Walker: "Have you gone plumb loco, Dan?"

Dan felt oddly like Indian Chief Red Cloud, who wanted to fight, whose men wanted to fight, but who knew in his heart that he could perhaps not win. He knew that you cannot buck that tangible yet intangible thing called Law, that some battles fate must decide and that only he who rides with a clean banner has nothing to fear. Those were his thoughts. He said:

"You forget that there is such a thing as the homestead law. I want no blood spilled except in self-defense."

"But you're crazy," roared McNeil, his freckled face flaming. "That is the chance of a lifetime. It's already started. If we don't get into it, *they* will follow it up. It depends on who moves first."

"Yes, yes."

Langdon said now: "And still, Dan, I think it would be wise to hire Bull Thompson and his cavalry. He can bottle them up here in town while *we* clean out the homesteads. We'll gain that much more time. Let's get moving."

"Just a moment!" Sutton's voice crackled through the room with brittle sarcasm, "Bull Thompson is wanted in three states."

"All right, he can get out of this one too, when he has done this little job. We want action, Dan. Where is Bert?"

"Yes, Bert started this. Where is he? And the others with him?"

A shot rattled the walls of the room. They put their attention on their leader once more. Sutton's thin lips moved grimly. "You want to know where my brother Bert is? All right, I'll tell you."

As they listened to Dan Sutton, many jaws drooped, then brows knit. "You want to play the game your enemies lead you into?" he finished. "You want to put yourselves beyond the law and lose your property to an Empire-hound? I told you there was more to this than meets the eye." He went to the door. "Wait here. I'll be back."

And this time no one dissented.

He went out of the place and began walking fast down along the boardwalk toward Beaver Street a block away where Doc Wells had offices. Men, cowhands and farmers alike moved out of his way. He noticed with some concern that Bull Thompson and his men had vanished from sight and speculated on this for a moment.

Outside the doctor's house he shouldered his way through a mob of farmers. They growled at him, but let him pass. "Your brother hangs if Jan dies," one man called after him, and at once a clamor of shouts went up.

Inside he met Doc Wells, in apron and with rolled-up sleeves. He gave Dan a quick look, then gestured with his head toward the outside. "Doesn't look so good, does it?" He went to the white kitchen sink and began washing the blood off his hands. There was a dull hopelessness and some acid in his voice as he said, "Are you hombres going to give me a lot more work?"

"It depends," said Dan gravely. Then, "How is he?"

"Just took a bullet out of his back. Pretty close to a lung tip. He's not so good." He gave a humorless cackle. "So you come asking the health of a farmer, Dan Sutton. What're you doing—sweating over your kid brother?"

"Maybe not."

The old man, with the privilege of his

reputation and profession, took his time. "Pretty wild kid that brother of yours. I understand Avery and a couple of deputies are out to fetch him in."

"Can I talk to Mallard?" said Dan, holding his temper.

"Farmer or cowman," said the doctor, "it's all the same to me. They got the same body, the same bones, and the same guts. Same way to bleed from a bullet in the back. We get awful equal, Dan, on a slab table with our shirt and pants off."

Dan let that ride, his teeth in his lips. "Let me talk to Mallard."

WITHOUT a word Wells went over and opened a door. Inside a bedroom a few of Mallard's friends crowded the foot end of a bed. The huge homestead leader was pale under his tan. As Wells felt of his pulse he opened his eyes slowly and at once saw Dan.

"Sutton," he said in a low voice.

"Mallard." It was a strange exchange of greeting. Dan added then, "How are you?"

"I could be better." A faint shadow of a grin flitted over the broad face. Dan said then: "You saw the man who shot you?"

The big head shook slowly.

"Mallard, somebody is taking us all for a ride. Tell me, who brought in these last settlers? Who is staking the homesteaders? Who's got financial liens on most of you?"

Mallard's face darkened. He shook his head again. "It would not be right. There is no reason—"

"Mallard," said Dan, "there are too many of you. The wind will tear the land up for you. Most of you will starve. You're being fooled."

"It's no use," said Mallard. "We can't talk." He turned his head toward the wall.

"Why don't you get out?" one of the men asked Dan. "You're losing this fight. We'll settle with you Suttons."

"Listen, Mallard," said Dan, ignoring the other. "My brother did *not* shoot you in the back. He started out to hunt you last night, to gunfight you, to get even. All right, I stopped him. I put a pistol slug in his shoulder. He couldn't ride a horse or hold a gun. He's home in bed. He's been there ever since. Ask my housekeeper, Emma Deacon. Ask Bill Taff, my foreman."

A stir went through the settlers. Mallard turned his head and opened his eyes again. "The truth?"

"Will you tell me now who's backing you?"

Mallard hesitated, then spoke. Dan reached out and touched his arm. "That is all I wanted to know. Get well, get out of that bed soon. Maybe we can talk this thing over some time after all."

He turned out of the room and left. A couple of the homesteaders left the house with him. The street was now boiling. Hundreds of eyes followed him as he swung around the corner and headed for the hotel. Plans were racing through his mind. It was now clear to him that some of Thompson's cavalry had borrowed Bert's horse and had perpetrated the deed on the river flat. If he could only keep the others in check; if the farmers could be convinced that they were being used. . . .

"Dan! Dan!"

He turned in the entrance to the lobby and saw Elinor Moran force her claybank through the crowd of mounts. She dismounted and ran across the sidewalk to him. Breathless, she drew him inside. "I must talk to you."

"What is it? Calm down."

She faced him excitedly. "Dan, you promised me. Tell me, did you set your men to burning the homesteads on the flats, to routing out women and children? I thought you wanted no bloodshed. I rode past on the ridge above just twenty minutes ago. Every shack and house along

the river is in flames. A man riding for help told me that five men have been shot. Dan, did you?" Her voice faltered in disbelief.

Even as she spoke, a low roar rose at the end of the street outside, rolling on like a wave. Apparently the news was reaching Langford.

Wide-eyed, Dan listened. He stared hard at the girl. He shook his head. "No," he said sharply. "No man moves without my order. Even hot-headed Bert is unable to interfere with my plans." Lightning understanding came to him then. "Thompson's cavalry!"

"But who would order them? Why would they—?" She halted and blanched.

Dan could not face her. "Wait here," he said. He left her and was abruptly inside the bar again, rapping for attention on a table with his gun.

"Thompson and his renegades are burning out the river flats," he said. "They're destroying the homesteader's property, lawfully claimed land. Do you know what that means?"

Sam Langdon came forward, puzzled. "It means fewer farmers," he said without humor. "But who set them to it? I thought you were against using Bull."

"Five men have been shot down already," Dan went on, his voice reaching every man in the room. "If *we* get the blame, who benefits?" His words rang out at them: "When those homesteads are wiped out and fail, the man who hold liens on them gets the land by law, doesn't he? Most of those farmers are in hock to *one* man."

Henry McNeil, little red spots on his cheeks, said, "You mean Evans Moran?"

"If we get the blame for murdering those homesteaders we can lose our lands and standing too. We can end up in jail, or worse. Then he's rid of us too. Do you understand?" He licked his lips. "And Evans Moran will have built himself a little kingdom. He knew this valley would never take the plow, and he played both sides against the middle."

There was a moment's silence. "All right," he said then, almost calmly. "To horse. To horse. Get down there, and let's round them up, and kill them if we have to before they go any further."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sound of the Bugle

AS THEY began scrambling out through the doors to reach their horses, Seth Walker, brushing past Dan, said: "Never thought I'd see the day I'd be running to save a nester's hide."

"It goes deeper than that, Seth."

Dan turned in the doorway to be confronted by Elinor. "You heard? I'm sorry."

"I know now why he always sent me away," she said slowly. "Why he kept me in expensive schools in the East, when home was where I wanted to be. The company he kept since mother died." She shook her head and turned away.

There was no time for him to linger. Outside, a new problem presented itself. Many of the farmers were rushing away to succor their friends and families on the river flats, but two solid groups flanked the block in which the hotel stood, hemming in the mounting cattlemen with leveled rifles and shotguns. Some even raised scythes and pick handles.

Dan spurred his buckskin out into the middle of the street where McNeil and Langford were wheeling their horses nervously. McNeil glanced at Dan, then nodded to one of the flanking groups of armed men. "Shall we go through?"

"Are you mad? One shot will set the whole town afire." A grim smile played over his features. "Evans Moran should see this. He holds the hole cards. If we fight these men we'll never lose the blame for what Thompson's cavalry is doing."

He rode up to the group nearest Beaver Street and dismounted. At once two rifles and half a dozen shotguns pointed at his belly. There were almost two score ranchers behind him; but he looked at a hundred farmers. "Send word to Mallard," he told two of the nearest men. "Tell him that we want to go through to stop those renegades on the flats who are burning your homes."

They grumbled, argued among themselves. He threw words at them, sharp, decisive, logical words, "By every minute you waste you lose. This is what Moran would want you to do. Use your heads."

At last a man started for the doctor's house. Minutes ticked away in almost silent tenseness. Suddenly there was a rising murmur and stir at the corner. Several men appeared carrying Mallard's bed, his head raised on pillows. They had torn the door frame from the house to get the white iron bed out.

"Sutton," the huge man waved a hand. "Let him through. Let them ride, for God's sake!" He sank back, paler, his voice drifting to a whisper.

But the tension slackened, wild stares went from mad eyes, the armed, revenge-hungry mob parted, and Dan Sutton and his men shot through like a horde of ghosts on horseback.

They had but to follow the rushing wagons and buckboards and heavy horses, bearing heavy riders that clumped toward the flats. They passed them and followed in the wake of the destruction that spread itself along the grasslands toward the horizon—burning homestead upon burning, smoking ruin.

An hour later Dan and his men, surprised the main body of the Cavalry by a flanking movement just as they were about to wipe out one more homestead. A fusillade of rifle fire rolled five men out of their saddles; the rest took to flight. Posse-like, the ranchers fanned out and set into a steady pursuit.

"I don't see Bull," said Dan and pulled up his horse. "You, McNeil, take charge of the pursuit. Don't let them rest; ride them down. Sam and Seth and I will pay a little visit at Moran's."

HE HAD guessed rightly. Evans Moran was sitting imperturbably on his front gallery, sipping a glass of Scotch when the three men rode up. A quick glance about had shown Dan that none of Thompson's Cavalry had arrived yet. They hitched their horses beyond the orchard and approached the house from the side. The ranch was peaceful—a couple of chorehands puttered in the yard, but no member of the riding crew was visible.

Moran stirred uncomfortably as the three men walked up the side steps to the gallery. He lost some of his color. For a moment he seemed to be considering his gun, then he smiled at Dan. "This is a surprise. A visit, eh? I thought you'd be very busy right now, Dan."

"Somebody is," said Dan pungently. "Somebody is, colonel."

The other's glance suddenly raked the yard nervously, as if for help. The purple veins on his temple pounded. Dan saw a fine bead of sweat on the forehead, but still the man kept his composure.

"Sit down won't you? Have a drink, gentlemen." He directed at Dan: "Don't tell me you've come to knuckle down to the settlers. You know, you might as well. Yon can't buck that tide of farming. The country is changing."

Innocence personified, thought Dan with a sickening taste in his mouth. Moran half rose out of his chair, indicating for Walker and Langdon to be seated. "I'll call the houseman for some glasses."

"Sit where you are, Moran. Keep your hands still."

The colonel froze in his chair. "What do you want, Dan? What's the meaning of this?"

Dan Sutton was cocking his ear against sounds from the road. His two friends were taking notice too. "Riders coming fast—about half a dozen of them." He spoke quickly to Walker. "Seth, go to the back of the house. Cover anybody you see in the kitchen.

"Sam, you and I will go inside these two windows; the drapes will hide us. Now colonel, you make any move that I don't like, any sign to Bull that we're here and you can't talk, and you'll get a bullet between the shoulder blades. Savvy?"

"Dan, what in holy hell is this? What—?"

"Shut up."

Two minutes later Bull Thompson and four men spurred into the yard on lathered horses; two of the men were blood-streaked from crease wounds, all were dusty and breathless. One man remained at the rail with the horses, the others pounded up the steps to where the owner of the E bar M sat. "I want cash," said Bull Thompson rapidly. "Cash, Moran. All the hard and ready you can lay your hands on. Right now, pronto."

The colonel's wooden lips moved, "What—what are you—"

"Come on, man, come on! We got no time to wait. Trot it out."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

The four men pressed in on the older man. "Cash! Did you hear me? There's a posse behind us."

Bull Thompson's pistol came jumping out of its holster. Moran raised his hands pleadingly. "Gentlemen, I don't know what this is all about."

Thompson's mouth dropped open with enraged incredulity. "So that's the way the wind's gonna blow! Well, we cleaned the river flats of nesters for you, didn't we? Come on."

At that moment Dan Sutton stepped through a window on one side of the group, while Sam Langdon came out through the door on the other. "I guess we heard enough. Put them up, gents, put them up. You're covered."

The big renegade leader spluttered an oath.

"Drop that gun, Bull. Drop it."

But at that moment the man with the horses rolled under the rail, drew and fired at Dan. Langdon sprang back.

Pandemonium roared for a full ten seconds. Two of the men dove over the gallery rail, ran for their horses. Walker came from the back of the house, picked them off. When the smoke cleared Bull Thompson was sitting against a post, breathing his last, a companion lay sprawled on the steps.

"Sounded—like—a good scheme—though—colonel." Bull Thompson's eyes glazed. He keeled over slowly.

The outlaws' horses milled excitedly in the yard. Dan spoke to the chorehands and couple of E bar M riders who cautiously approached. He pointed at a man. "Saddle the colonel a horse, hombre. He's riding out of here, never coming back. You hear that, Moran?"

A WHILE later the three men were riding slowly back toward town. "Most of the farmers are ruined now," mused Dan. "Many of them will have to leave and go somewhere else. With those that remain we'll have to make some kind of agreement about grazing and water rights. Would you fellows be willing to work it out that way?"

The others nodded agreement.

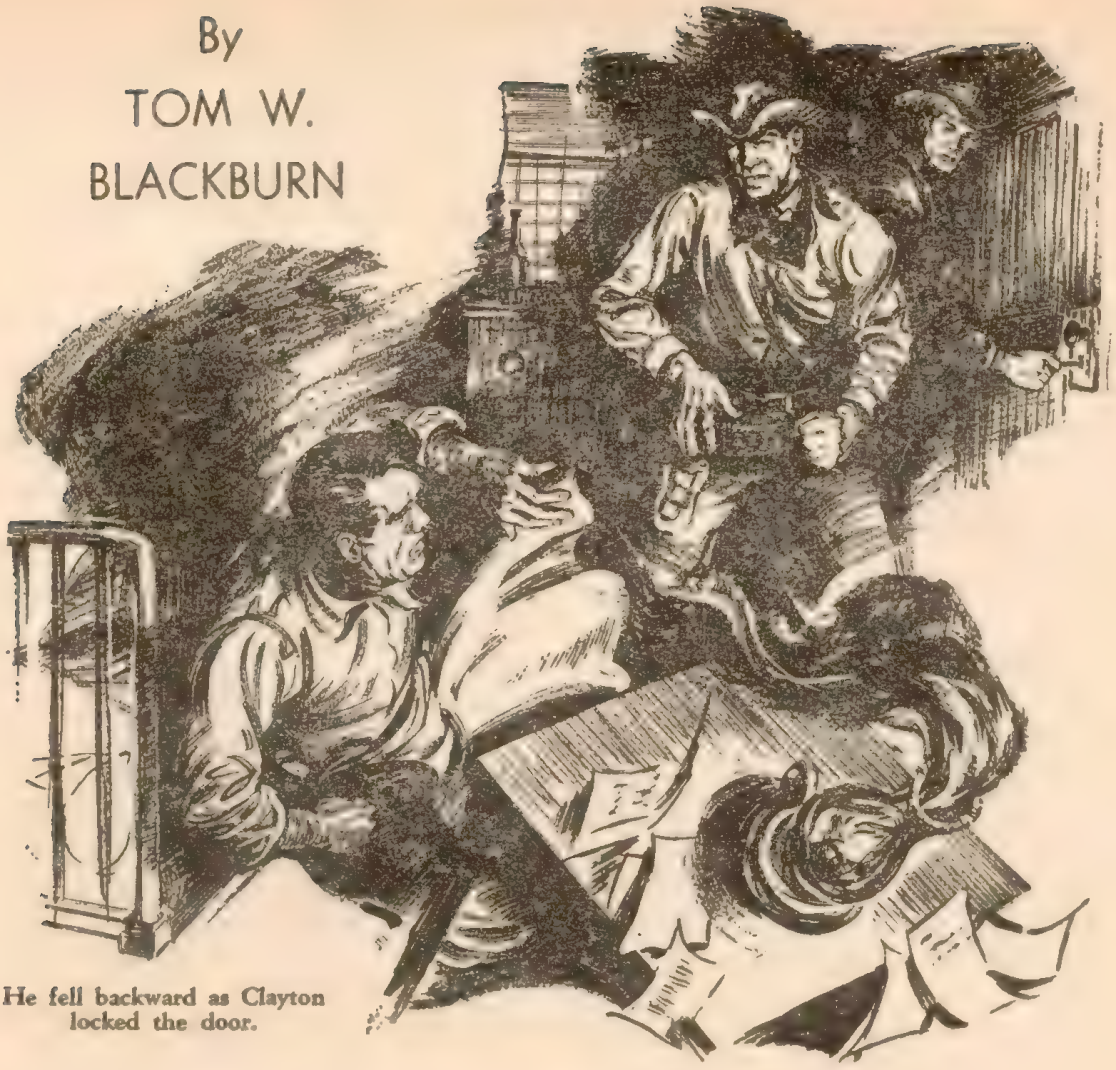
Elinor Moran was riding toward him. She pulled up her mount. "Dad—?"

"No, your father was unhurt. But he's gone. I doubt that he'll ever be back. I guess the place is yours now."

They were riding stirrup to stirrup again. She said, "But there'll be peace now."

THE END

By
TOM W.
BLACKBURN



He fell backward as Clayton locked the door.

PEPPERDINE'S HANGNOOSE HASH

Angus Pepperdine, top-string ranch cook and man of mystery, had one sure-fire recipe for the Willow Creek mess: "If it's meat, stew it. If it's vegetables, boil it. If it's cattle rustlers, serve 'em up with hot-lead sauce!"

ANGUS PEPPERDINE hid his possibles bag and the staff to which it was tied behind a tool shed and moved toward the cook shack, keeping unobtrusively to the walls of buildings and their shadow. Dust was lining out in half a dozen separate puffs across the vegas, indicating work crews were already scattering for the day. This Willow Creek spread was one of the largest operated by the wide-flung Silver Dollar Cattle Company, and there was apt to be a sizable yard crew about the place. It was just as well not to be seen for a little while yet.

Shack was hardly the word for the adobe dining room and kitchen at Willow Creek. It was a solid building, carefully maintained, big and well-equipped. Capable, Angus thought, of feeding fifty men at a sitting. The kind of a berth always sought after and seldom found by members of the restless, temperamental, continually drifting ranch cooks. A big kitchen, private quarters, and unquestionably flunkies to do the worst of the heavy work. His task, he thought, would not be too easy. The kitchen door was open. He slid through it.

BEHIND a long, solid work table of clean white pine, a tall, thin man was kneading bread dough with unnecessary fierceness. He glanced up and stiffened as Angus entered.

"Out!" he shouted. "I want no corral tracks in my kitchen. Out and stay out, by hell! You know better—"

He broke off, recognizing Angus as a stranger. Angus held up his hands. The cook looked at them. They were short-fingered, strong, but the skin was pale in color and they were immaculately clean, even to the rim of the nails—the peculiar cleanness which was the trade mark of a kitchen man. The thin man behind the table relaxed.

"Draw up a chair," he invited grudgingly. "There's coffee on the stove. Bacon and eggs in the chest beside the window. Help yourself. Where you from?"

"Over the divide," Angus said. "Name's Pepperdine."

"I'm Skinny Hale," the thin man said. "Fired?"

Angus shook his head. He peeled off his coat, rinsed his hands over a sink with a cistern pump, and set about making his own breakfast with the accepted ease tradition guaranteed one cook pausing for a visit in another's kitchen.

"Quit," he said. "I was working for a big outfit, about this size. Big shack, too. Good pay and quarters. But the manager was always riding me, and I just can't be rode. No job's worth it!"

Hale nodded sympathetically. He poured himself coffee and pulled up a chair opposite Angus when he sat down to eat.

"We got our rights," Hale said. "This manager, he was wanting special privileges all the time?" Angus shook his head again and spoke with his mouth full.

"No," he answered. "That was the trouble with him. He wouldn't build any pressure, right out in the open. Just give you the point of a needle, whenever he got the chance. Wouldn't say nothing about a good meal. Then he'd pour it on about how good the chow was sometime when it wasn't up to snuff, and I knew it.

"Cozying around all the time, and me knowing every minute he figured he roomed next to God and I was just a damned cook, short on brains and about as important to his ranch as a fly on the ear of one of his broomtails. I got enough of it, finally, so I showed him. Just walked off. Let him feed that pack of hollow-legged saddle-bums he called a crew!"

Hale nodded sympathetically again. A thoughtful look came up in his eyes and he began to breathe a little faster.

"I know what you mean," he said. "We got a manager here on Willow Creek. Him and the range-boss is thicker than thieves and there ain't a man on the place amounts to anything, but them. Them two won't even eat in the shack here with the rest of the crew. I got to see a flunky sets a special table in the boss-house and serves it. As though I didn't have enough to do, keeping things going in the shack here, what with the kind of flunkies I get! It riles a man."

"If these big companies would put as good men in the boss-houses on their spreads as they've got in their cook shacks, things would be different," Angus said with conviction. Hale continued to look

thoughtful. Angus glanced around the shack. "Serving a special table's a nuisance," he went on, "but you're lucky your manager and his range-boss friend don't crowd you worse than that. You got a good setup here."

Hale snorted with a surprising amount of choler.

"That's what scorches my shirt-tail!" he snapped. "Willow Creek looks perfect and nobody can see the holes in it. Why, hell, I ain't been into town in more'n eight weeks. Clayton—he's the manager—don't appear to want his crew wandering around. Seems he wants to know where every man is, all the time. And McGuire, the range boss, backs him up.

"They've had plenty of turnover in their saddle crew. They're plenty lucky they haven't found themselves without a cook some meal. I'd like to see 'em hung up like that!"

"Wait a minute," Angus protested solemnly, "there's plenty jobs, but this is a first-class kitchen. No use tossing it over. A man can get a burr under a manager's blanket by putting him in a bind for more money. That's where it hurts. These big company men got to run their kitchens like everything else, on a budget. Cost 'em a few dollars, and it turns them into white men pretty fast. I wouldn't get hasty, Hale."

A CRAFTY look came into the thin man's eyes. He banged his hand down on the table.

"Hasty!" he spat, and he slid out of his apron. "Why, my toes been curling for two months, Pepperdine. I been buildin' to this. And you give me the right hitch to use. Sit tight, right here. Give me a couple of minutes and you'll be hearing Hack Clayton squeal about his pocketbook hurt clean across the yard!"

Hale strode out the door. Angus Pepperdine leaned back in his chair and contentedly sipped his coffee. Hale was not gone long. He came sweeping back into the kitchen with his face livid and kicked open the door leading to his quarters. Angus rose and followed him. The Willow Creek cook was slamming his belongings into a battered valise.

"Fired?" he asked, sympathetically.

"Quit!" Hale growled. "When the day comes I'll let a thin-nosed ranch manager tell me how to run my kitchen, I'll drop dead and to hell with his sixty dollars a month!"

"Independence," Angus said. "That's what I like to see—a man with independence."

Hale snapped the mouth of his valise closed and lugged it back into the kitchen.

"You're damn' shouting," he agreed. "Let Clayton get him another man to feed his blasted crew. It'll cost him more than the ten iron men a month I hit him for before he does. Let him get one of Max McGuire's riders in here to stew and muck, seeing as him and McGuire are so blamed thick. In three days he won't have a hand on the place. Maybe I'd have took a squeal about the hoist I wanted, but when he starts hollering about kitchen costs for months back, I cash my chips. You finish your breakfast?"

"No," Angus lied blandly.

"I can't get off this place fast enough," Hale said. "The candy wagon's just leaving for town for supplies. I'm riding in on it. Maybe I'll see you there, later, eh?"

"Maybe," Angus agreed. Hale went out the door. Angus heard him shouting unpleasantly at someone in the yard. A few moments later wheels rattled and the shouting faded. Angus watched the door. A man appeared in it presently. A slender, dapper man, in clothes too expensive for a ranch yard, and with a sharp, arrogantly lined face.

"Somebody said there was a bum in here," the man said.

"Yeah," Angus answered. "Thought this place might be needing a cook."

The man in the doorway swore angrily.

"So you built that fire under Hale!" he charged.

"When a man wants a job," Angus said, "he'll make a fool out of somebody if he can. You tell the boss of this place that right this minute he can hire himself the best cook this range ever saw for fifty a month—and that's saving him money."

"I'm the boss," the man in the doorway said. "Clayton's the name. There's something wrong with you, Cookie. A good man don't work for less than the man ahead of him."

"All right," Angus said pleasantly. "Make it seventy a month, then. That will cost you some, and I'm that good."

"We'll try sixty, same as Hale got," Clayton answered. "And I'll expect you to cut his costs twenty-five dollars a week. Do that and keep your nose in the kitchen here, where it belongs, and things'll go good."

"Sure," Angus agreed. "Sure, Mr. Clayton."

The manager of Willow Creek backed out of the door. Angus Pepperdine smiled with full satisfaction. There was no place on a ranch where a man could hear so much as he could in the cook shack. There was no man on a ranch who could make friends so readily or exact so much from them.

The Silver Dollar Cattle Company had suspicions that part of Willow Creek's profits were being bled away before reports were forwarded to the main office. The Silver Dollar Cattle Company had hired Angus Pepperdine, a man of numberless small accomplishments, to verify the truth or falsity of these suspicions. This he was now prepared to do.

Stepping out into the yard, he quite openly walked down to the tool shed and retrieved his possibles bag and staff. Mr. Hack Clayton had the appearance of a swift man at cards. If this was so—if the affection Skinny Hale had mentioned between Clayton and his range boss was of a conniving kind—the two of them had better move very cautiously, indeed. They would now be under watchful eyes.

ANGUS PEPPERDINE was not a man who took forever to do a middling difficult job. Neither was he unduly hasty, without an eye for details and a certain artistry requiring groundwork at each stage of a plan moving on toward completion. It took the better part of a week to establish himself soundly at Willow Creek. Knowing his own limitations and the possible strength of those he had been hired to unmask, he wanted friends, first. These were not difficult to obtain.

He made no attempt to hold to the usual ranch ban against saddle hands in the kitchen, permitting experimentally cautious riders to enter his domain as they wished, within the limits of room and the necessity of getting meals out on time. He kept his flunkies sore-bellied with a steady string of hilarious stories dealing for the most part with foremen, stock-bosses, executives, and range owners, knowing the flunkies would broadcast his humor through the bunkhouses and so bring others to the kitchen.

When the night's cleanup was done he put three gallons of fresh coffee on the stove and stacked cups, saucers, spoons, milk, and sugar on the big pine work table. During the day he found time to replenish a bin in the cupboards so that there was always a supply of fresh doughnuts or cakes available to nocturnal raiders. Thus he developed a company of kitchen regulars.

And there was the matter of meals. He knew range men too well to embroider the staples of their diet. But he could do much with the trimmings. There was the matter of sweet-apple pie, a dish limited almost wholly to the cattle country.

Generally this was done as a simple double-crust pastry whose greatest charm

was that the sliced apple of its filling was precooked in syrup until it was practically candied before being poured between crusts. Angus added a fine touch to it. When the apple slices were candied, he dumped them into a great fluff of sweetened whipped cream and poured this between a pair of hot, flaky crusts a few moments before serving. It was effective bait.

During this time, while he was building his own strength, Angus gave much thought to the operation of the ranch, itself. He was forced to do his thinking in the abstract. In mid-afternoon of his third day, he had left the cook-shack, intending to make a thorough circuit of the ranch yard and what fenced grass was within an hour's walking range.

He had thought a look at the grass and some of the animals in it might give him some hint of what, if anything, was amiss at Willow Creek. However, he wasn't a hundred yards from the cookshack before Max McGuire stepped out from the shade of a building and blocked his path.

McGuire was of the old school of ramrods, believing a man's value to his employer, his professional knowledge and skill, and even his worth as a man was measured by his truculence, the sulphurous scope of his vocabulary, and the hardness of his fists.

In addition, McGuire habitually wore a use-polished gun low and forward on his thigh, where it was uncomfortable and continually in the way of any activity not involving it, but where it could be reached with a maximum of speed. Working cattlemen did not wear their guns in this position—and Angus nodded to himself.

McGUIRE stabbed a finger against Angus' chest.

"Look, Cookie," he said unpleasantly, "let's get this straight. You run your cookshack right and you won't have no trouble. But you let me and Hack run the rest of the ranch. Maybe you wanted work like you said when you talked Skinny Hale out of this job. Maybe you didn't. I don't care and neither does Clayton. But every man on Willow Creek payroll sticks to his own chores and yours ain't out here in the yard. Get on back to your kitchen."

Angus returned to the cookshack. Since he was denied activity, he was driven to plot. Lying at ease on his bed in his room off of the kitchen, he put himself in the shoes of Max McGuire and Hack Clayton, adding for purposes of thought, the purpose of which the Silver Dollar Cattle Company suspected them—that of pocketing profits which rightfully belonged to the stockholders.

First off, it became apparent that as a branch ranch, with payrolls and other money transactions handled by the main office of the company, the only profits available to Clayton and McGuire were on the hoof. He considered the country in which Willow Creek lay, seeking a place where profits on the hoof could be converted to profits in the bank. The answer was not difficult, he found.

The town of Willow Springs was patronized by Willow Creek men. Supplies all came from there. But Angus had heard talk that it was a poor place for buying as well as fun, compared to the town of Halo, in the opposite direction. Halo was a mill and mining town, built around the great pits of a Comanche Copper Company mine. And strict ranch rules forbade Willow Creek men to patronize it.

Angus thought it was possible that range men and mine men did not mix well, and Willow Creek contact with Halo would lead to constant trouble. But the thought occurred to him that mine men had prodigious appetites and might well have a taste for cheap beef.

Following this line of thought, it seemed equally possibly that if an enterprising and unparticular butcher existed in Halo, Wil-

low Creek management might well wish to keep Willow Creek hands away from a place where they might hear gossip which would be hard to explain on the ranch. Most riders had an unreasonable loyalty to their own brand, in spite of their grouching against it, and some might take a hostile view of Willow Creek beef going to market in the middle of the night.

A good beef steer might run a hundred dollars a head at Willow Creek's legal loading chutes in shipping season. If ten animals a week were straying into Halo at half that figure, there might be as much as two thousand dollars a month being cut up after dark. And if so, the Silver Dollar Cattle Company had ample grounds for suspicion concerning the honesty of its executive employees.

Angus rolled over onto his belly on his bed and supported his chin in his cupped hands. Two thousand dollars a month would not go far if cut into too many pieces. And it was difficult for even skilled connivers to secure an entire crew which was dishonest. So the trick was to know how Clayton and McGuire, if they were the blacklegs he now painted them in speculation, managed to spirit Willow Creek stock off of the ranch without the knowledge of most of the crew.

To do this, Angus realized he needed a geographic knowledge of the ranch, and Clayton and McGuire would plainly not give him the freedom to acquire it. He grinned slightly. It was curious how the dishonest, in planning in detail, often drove honest men to equal connivery to trap them.

WHEN he had inspected the night cleanup job done by the two flunkies, Angus retired to his quarters, but did not close the door leading from the kitchen. Digging out a tablet and a pencil, he lay on his bed and hastily scribbled anything which came to mind until he had several sheets covered with his flowing handwriting. He stacked these and idled with his pencil, waiting. Presently the curious could not resist the open door. Two of the half dozen or so riders who had already come into the kitchen walked into his room, coffee mug and doughnut in hand. One was the kid of the crew, known as Curly. The other was a scarred, arthritic saddle veteran called Old Mose. Both eyed Angus curiously.

"What you doing?" Curly wanted to know.

"Nothing," Angus lied with a show of modesty. "Just a sort of hobby. Been working it spare times. Writing a sort of book on beef. Stuff on how a big outfit operates."

Old Mose looked meaningfully at Curly and nodded.

"Damned good idea, Cookie," he said sourly. "Time these blasted kids a man has got to ride with nowadays had something they could read to give 'em the savvy they'll never get by chafin' the seat of their pants. How's it going?"

"Not so good," Angus said lugubriously. "Figured I'd use Willow Creek for a pattern, but the way it is, I don't get out on the grass, so I can't even get the lay of the land, let alone how it works."

"Mighty good doughnuts, tonight," Curly said.

Old Mose put down his coffe mug.

"Here, Cookie, give me that pencil," he said gruffly. "I can show you how Willow Creek fences run. If I can't, nobody can. I been here long enough."

Angus relinquished his pencil with a show of reluctance. The pencil worked swiftly in the veteran rider's cramped fingers, tracing out a remarkably clean plan of the entire ranch, boundaries and cross-fencing. Angus saw that the graze on Willow Creek was cut into quadrants —three smaller sections and one huge one, lying along one whole boundary on the side skirted by the road from Willow

Springs town, straight through to Halo.

"Clayton figures he's a scientist," Mose growled. "And McGuire goes along with him for some damned reason. The crew is cut up into three parties. Each one works the stuff in one of these small quarters, nursing it along until it's up to shipping standards. When it is, it's dumped into that big graze on this side.

"When it's time to ship, all three parties bunch for a roundup and we cut out the number of head Clayton and McGuire tell us we're going to ship. Damnedest way to operate I ever saw. Wouldn't work anyplace but there, where the spread is all on flat country and there ain't any seasonal graze. Stuff about smaller parties being more efficient than lumping the crew together. Talk, too, about there being good in competition between the bunches working the small quarters. Hell!"

Mose tossed the pencil down. Angus looked appreciatively at the plan the old rider had drawn.

"Sure gets the idea across," he said. "But it don't mean much for me. I can't get much out of it till I got an idea how many head run in each small quarter and how many get dumped into the big quarter, and how many get shipped from it."

"I tallied the shipments, last three times we run stuff into the chutes," Mose said. "Reckon I've got the figures still in my tally book, down to the bunkhouse."

"Sure," Curly agreed. "And Clayton's idea about competition's been working good enough, in spite of Mose's grouching. We been making up pools down to the bunkhouse as to which party in the crew moved the most stock from their little quarter into the big one each month. I been score keeper. I got that stuff written down somewhere."

Angus reached under his bunk and drew out a box. He took off the lid.

"Boys, I tried my hand at making up a little candy yesterday. Try a piece," he said.

CURLY and Old Mose produced the figures they had promised. Angus made a chart of them, showing the movement of cattle from each of the working sections to the larger quarter where the stock was held for fattening and shipment. When he had finished, facts were self-evident.

Although Clayton and McGuire were shrewd enough to hold their shipments down so that all of the beef in the last quarter was never run through the chutes and therefor never getting a full count, there could be no doubt that they were clipping Willow Creek Ranch and the Silver Dollar Cattle Company at about the rate Angus had first guessed.

In three months there was something over a hundred head of cattle which could not be accounted for, even allowing for inaccuracies in his chart and the fact that a certain number of cattle remained constantly in the last quarter of the ranch, uncounted and outside of his calculations.

It was late when Angus finished his chart. He put it aside, smiling with good, belly-warming satisfaction. He was getting tired of feeding Willow Creek. Cooking was something he turned to for relaxation. His skill was that of an amateur. And running a big cookshack was too much like work. He would be glad to move on.

There was only one other item to add to the stew he had been brewing here. He thought the pot was about ready to boil. Opening his possibles bag, he drew out a heavy-framed, very short-barreled pistol. He spun the cylinder with practical precaution, then shoved the weapon under his pillow.

However, he had no company during the night. All of the following day he kept restlessly at his kitchen tasks, but he saw nothing of Hack Clayton or Max McGuire. He began to wonder if his recipe had been faulty. Or had he misjudged the speed of bunkhouse gossip?

It was hard to know for a certainly.

Certainly he had thought news of his charts and his writing down of facts about Willow Creek would reach the manager and the range boss of the ranch as quickly as if he had himself shouted it across the compound to them. Waiting for the lid to come off was tedious, and the pistol in his belt under his apron was uncomfortable.

But McGuire and Clayton made no movement toward him until after the night meal. They came back through the kitchen when they left the table in the big dining room, Clayton carrying the week's kitchen requisition sheet as though his business was a casual question about this. Angus was in his quarters and did not see them coming until they had nearly reached his door.

He was aware that the din of talk in the dining room and the clatter of the flunkies stacking cleared dishes was nearly ideal screen for any unusual sounds. He tried to get back out into the kitchen, but McGuire caught him with a stiffened arm and shoved him back into his room. Clayton followed them and kicked the door shut, turning the key in the lock.

"Where's the book you're writing?" McGuire growled. Angus did not answer. Clayton had already found the loose tablet sheets on the stand by his bed. The ranch manager ran swiftly through them, running his eyes over the ruled squares of his stock movement charts. When he finished, he handed them wordlessly to McGuire. The stock boss stared at them blankly, then tossed them on the bed.

"That don't mean anything to me, Hack," he grunted. "How much does he know?"

"Everything—down to a nose-count of the stuff we've handled the last three months," Clayton said quietly. "Only thing that's missing is how we kill the stuff and where it goes."

"I figured I'd pick that up when I left," Angus said. "Probably a coulee across the line on the Halo road that makes a good place to butcher. You wouldn't do it yourselves. The man from Halo who comes after the beef takes it from you on the hoof, I suppose."

"SEE?" Clayton said to McGuire. The stock boss nodded sullenly.

"Then you're right, Hack. He's a company man; got us cold. I don't like it. After the way he's been cooking, he's going to be harder to get rid of than Santa Claus in a house with kids on Christmas Eve!"

"My report goes by mail to the main office," Angus said. "You'd have three-four days to clear the country."

"We're staying," Clayton answered shortly. "We like the pay goes with this job. Cooks are a drifting kind. You're pulling out tonight. Feet-first, after lights are out. There's a coulee in the east quarter with a cutbank above it that'll cave easy. You're going to have a deep grave and plenty to top-cover, Cookie."

"The main office will want to know where I am," Angus suggested.

"It'll take 'em a hell of a long time to find out," Clayton snapped. He crossed to the door and listened. Cleanup racket in the kitchen was at its height. "The boys are going to be sore as hell in the morning when they find out this cook got riled over the riding I gave him on his requisition budget and skinned out during the night," he said to McGuire.

The range boss grinned unpleasantly and started forward. Angus felt the muscles of his body tighten. This was where he took hold of the hot pot handle, for it was time this mess came off of the fire. He made an apparently clumsy backward step, losing his balance, and fell against the lamp stand at the head of his bed. Lamp and stand crashed to the floor with him and darkness struck the room like a blow.

Under the bed was the instinctive place to seek shelter. Angus rolled in the opposite direction, full across the open floor. And as he rolled, he pulled the solid fistful of pistol from under his apron. His rolling body struck McGuire's feet, cutting them from under him. The man came down, finding Angus and swiping at him with the gun he also had drawn.

This was the instant of biggest risk. Angus knew neither of the Willow Creek men would risk a shot, certain to be audible over even the racket in the kitchen beyond the door. And he was himself restrained by a professional pride in the cleanliness of his work.

McGuire's blow, blind at best, landed while the man was still falling, a heavy, cramping, iron-studded impact against Pepperdine's belly muscles. Angus grunted, cocked his short legs upward, and took the unbalanced weight of McGuire's body on his heels.

Straightening his legs, he flung McGuire's hips and legs upward as the bulk of the man's torso came down, so that the range boss turned over in mid-air and crashed down across the bed. Angus heard the long, rushing exhalation the man made as he landed, and judged he was momentarily beyond concern.

Rolling quickly to his knees, he made a sweeping search for Hack Clayton with the heavy gun in his fist. It touched nothing in its sweep, and he scuttled forward, making another try.

But he had underestimated Clayton. The man had known the danger of standing on the floor and had apparently climbed onto a chair. He launched himself from this at the sound of Pepperdine's movement and landed heavily across his back, flattening Angus against the planking.

The Pepperdines were small men, inclined to round bellies and a practical view of all problems. Hack Clayton made a pass in the vicinity of Angus' head with his weapon and Angus heard the flooring splinter under the blow. He seized opportunity. One of Clayton's forearms was crushed against his nose. He tilted his head and used teeth set in solid jaws. The forearm was frantically torn away.

Clayton half rose from him with a sharp oath. The sound made an admirable target. Angus made a short, awkward swing, a little more desperate than he

WHEN RED HELL HIT HATVILLE

by James Shaffer

Danny Trumbo was always glad to earn a dishonest dollar, but he didn't hanker to be the Judas goat that lead those unwary sodbusters to the slaughter. . . . Not after he saw the girl, Big Buffalo's gleaming knife, and the hot lead coin that would be his double-cross payment!

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liked, but he had the satisfaction of feeling the man on top of him stiffen and roll limply to one side.

McGUIRE had spilled from the bed and was on his feet, still a little unsteady if the shuffling sound of his boots was any indication, but Angus had lost track of his exact position and he was in a hurry to be done with this business in the dark.

Skidding his gun across the floor to the corner under his bunk, he bounded upright. Seizing the chair from which Clayton had leaped onto him, he started across the room, swinging this widely with each stride. On the second swing it connected solidly. McGuire went down and there was no other sound above Pepperdine's own labored breathing.

Running a swift hand through his thin hair and making a dusting pass at the knees of his trousers in the interest of tidiness, Angus jerked open the door into the kitchen. Old Mose and Curly stood outside this, obviously on the point of opening it, themselves. Their eyes ran over Angus and he realized he probably still appeared dishevelled.

"What the hell you been doing in there, Cookie?" Mose asked sharply.

"Fighting my way out of a kettle of fish," Angus said. "Clayton and McGuire came around with something on their minds and it didn't look healthy for me."

Mose stuck his head through the door and immediately withdrew it.

"Cookie, you're wasting your talents!" he said with admiration. "I haven't seen quieter carcasses in a smokehouse. I better get pigging strings onto 'em before they come around, or they'll tear the place down. How come they was hunting you?"

"I added up the figures you and Curly gave me. Clayton and McGuire didn't like the answers. When you tie them, Mose, tag them for shipment to the Silver Dollar Cattle Company back in Denver."

"I should have knowed better," Mose grunted ruefully. "Luck don't turn up a cook like you on a spread like this. I should have knowed you were a company man. So should McGuire and Clayton. What you get on them?"

"A lot of Silver Dollar beef, sold off in Halo. Think you could run this outfit without butchering on the side, Mose?" The veteran grinned. Pepperdine nodded. "You're foreman, then. I'll try to get headquarters to make it permanent. That'll handle the boss-house problem. Something's got to be done about the cook-shack."

He eyed Curly, who was swallowing the last segment of a doughnut. Peeling off his smudged apron, Angus tossed it to the boy. Curly waved his arms in horror.

"Nothing to it," Angus said. "First, remember the beginner's rules. If it's meat, stew it. If it's vegetable, boil it. If it's bread, bake it. And second, be damned sure you can run faster than the men you're feeding."

"We'll be dead in a week!" Mose said.

"Make it ten days," Angus suggested. "I can get you a new regular for the kitchen by then. Curly, get one of the boys to hitch up the buckboard while Mose and I wrap up my baggage. There's an early morning train out of Halo and there's a butcher I want to see over there on the way through."

"I never would have figured a gent like you'd snag them two," Curly said.

"Never figured you'd be a ranch cook, either, did you?" Angus asked with a grin. "Better try a stew for a starter, boy. You can begin with anything and keep on adding what you run across till you figure the mess has cooked long enough. With luck, you'll have something you can use when you're through. Always work that way, myself."

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

The strange sense of humor of Jared "Joker" Wilson, probably caused dozens of nervous breakdowns in Tucson. A Civil War veteran, he had lost his right arm at Chancellorsville and had it replaced by an extremely realistic substitute. Strolling up to a stranger at the bar of a saloon, he would say, "Shay, fellow, I like you. Yer my best friend. Why, for you, I'd cut off my right arm!" And so saying, he would reach for a knife, slice at his sleeve, and hand over his right arm to the stranger — who invariably run screaming into the street.

Sheriff Andrew McElveroy of Miller's Falls, Wyoming, belived in love. A 67-year-old bachelor himself, he pored over romantic novels, crushed flowers in books, and never missed a wedding. His young deputy was about to marry the daughter of the rich rancher Widow Ada Hogan. The Widow was all set to accompany the couple on their wedding trip to Konsas City. "Don't worry," the sheriff told the despairing bridegroom. "I'll fix things." And he did. Just as the ceremony was completed, the sheriff firmly detached the new mother-in-law from the wedding party and conducted her to jail— for non-payment of taxes.

U. S. Army Lieutenant Robert Clayton, who invented the famous Clayton low military saddle, was an Indian fighter of considerable daring and renown. No one questioned his courage, but many ridiculed his well-known loathing for the discomforts of active duty: rain, wet mud, dust, soggy shoes and dirty clothes. Once, surrounded by a band of Sioux and hopelessly outnumbered, he sent the following message for help: "Please send reinforcements, we are in desperate danger. Also send dry socks mine are wet."

Joe Prince, the Little Rockies bandit, was in a tight spot when the members of his outlaw band went to his rescue—he was in a Montana courtroom, charged with murder. His rescuers arrived just as the jury filed back into the room. "I'm not going to leave here an escaped criminal," Prince insisted. "I'll leave as a free man—or not at all." Under the drawn guns of his men, the jury was polled quickly. Its verdict, painfully prompt, was: not guilty. Prince was satisfied. "I always like everything legal," he remarked to the purple-faced Judge, and walked out.

FIGHTING SON OF THE WHITE WATER

By GIFF CHESHIRE

More than once the spark of anger had set off Johnny Lind's powderkeg temper, and made him a madman of slashing knuckles and sledge-hammer fists. . . . But now he must win peace from the hated Klamath redskins with words he did not know, or give in to smoldering pride, and tear them apart with his hands — which would sweep the Columbia valley with the raging red hell-fire of bloody war! . . .

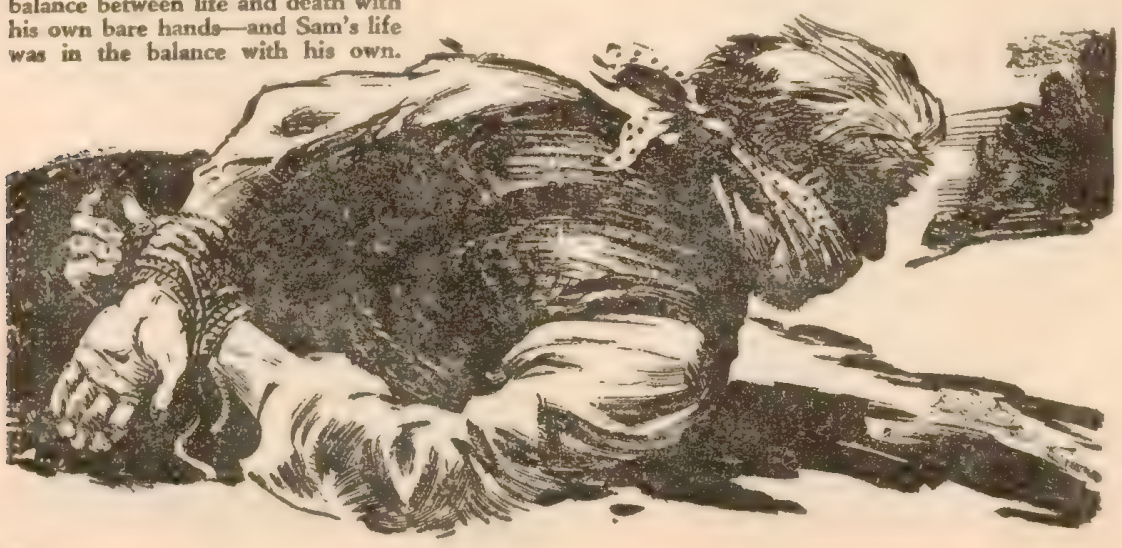
CHAPTER ONE

The Man for the Job

ROUNDING the headland where the trail twisted in against the the river, Johnny Lind's gaze fell upon the heaped-up chaos men long ago had named Hour-Glass Falls. He stood his horse in the shadow of the high overhang, drawing from the scene of ageless turbulence a quality that sent his breath deeper into his lungs.

It would never change, though men and circumstances shaped themselves in countless patterns. There would always be this feeling of serenity in which a man could sense the underlying presence of deep violence.

To his right, beyond a scattering of Indian hovels, the broad river pursed to blow its flood through the broken stricture. Yellow light struck its surface, seeming to heat it to the point of boiling. Below in the gut were the jagged rocks on which a giant spider seemed to have



Johnny knew he had to tip the balance between life and death with his own bare hands—and Sam's life was in the balance with his own.

labored, spinning the first runners of its black web.

These were the cables, Johnny knew, by which the Indians got out over the raging channels with their dip nets, claiming the season's bounty in steelhead and blueback salmon.

Farther to his left, where a pole lifted like a blunt finger, men were grouped. A wagon and team stood there, and Johnny knew there would be a pair of platform scales, glistening and smelling from countless tons of fish that had passed across them. He wondered if Os Legg was still buying for old Sam Delfel's cannery, and then he was thinking of Jean, Sam's girl, and considering how she would likely greet Johnny Lind.

THERE WAS a quick stirring in the group at the distant cable anchor. Johnny stiffened in the saddle. Two brawling figures tumbled out from the mass, milled for a moment and spilled down. Johnny grinned without relish. Os Legg was still on the job, and he would be the man on top down there.

Though he had no particular interest in this fight, he watched it idly. He knew the circumstances even at this distance, drawing them from his memory of many similar occasions. Some Indian had argued over Legg's weights. Legg was settling it in his characteristic fashion. Presently one figure rose from the ground. Then the other got up and slumped.

Johnny shaped up a cigarette, lighted it thoughtfully, then turned his horse back to the Digger City trail. He denied purpose in the fact that he held the horse to a jog. He saw, however, that Os Legg's fish wagon was toiling out from the fishing ground to the road.

A lean man of twenty-five, Johnny Lind sat his saddle in total ease. The year on the cattle ranges beyond the mountains had deepened the hickory tone of his good-looking face and slender, restless hands. Reflective lights brightened his gray eyes as he dragged on his cigarette.

The sense of elapsed time depended a good deal on what a man had missed in the interim, he reflected. It seemed ages since he had ridden east on this trail. For all of time's slow wearing, back yonder, he had not realized it would give him this deep elation to be coming home.

Os Legg's wagon pulled in at the forks before Johnny reached it. Now he lifted his horse to a faster walk, his gaze on the immense figure of Sam Delfel's fish buyer. He swung out to escape the wagon's dust and gave signs of riding past before he turned his head as he breasted the driver.

"Howdy, Os."

Preoccupation had kept Os Legg indifferent until now. Turning his head, he swept a gaze to the saddle horse. He lifted a curled finger to the point of his stubbled chin.

"Johnny Lind!"

"Big as life and twice as natural," Johnny agreed cheerfully. He had been pleased by the man's reaction. It was giving Legg a harder mauling than the man had just now given some poor Indian that had helped cost Johnny his job with old Sam, over a year before.

There was wariness and confusion in Legg's deep-set eyes. "What're you doing back here, Johnny?"

"Tired of wandering," Johnny said.

Legg gave this deep thought. "I don't reckon you'll get on at the cannery again, if that's what you're aiming at. Sam's pretty well out of it now, and Redburn's still manager. Glenn Redburn don't like you, Johnny, in case you don't know."

"I've got no illusions on that score, Os. I want no job from him."

The light in Legg's eyes brightened. "Say, it couldn't be the wedding that brought you home? You heard Redburn's marrying Sam's girl in a couple of weeks, Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged. "Think my being here'll scare him any?" He rode on. He knew about the wedding, all right, and he had a pretty good idea who had sent him the newspaper clipping announcing it.

DIGGER CITY rose ahead of him. Toward his right, as he drew toward the town, were the huddled shapes of Sam Delfel's salmon cannery. Sweeping them with a brief inspection, he noted that the place looked run-down. His own prejudice could be painting that impression, he reminded himself. He had had his shot at the manager's job, down there, and missed it a mile. Just as he had missed his chance with Jean Delfel. If Glenn Redburn had the necessary, Johnny had no quarrel with him. Yet something had brought him back, something had impelled him to insert himself into the two weeks margin that was left.

Johnny found Digger City little changed. Coming onto the main street, he rode half its length, then turned his horse left up the hill onto a quiet side street. Nobody, to that point, had blown any bugle to announce his return. Johnny grinned at the thought and pulled up at Slowgow's stable.

"Johnny Lind!" Old George Slowgow hobbled out of the harness room, a bridle in one hand, an oily rag in the other. "You doggone tumbleweed, you're back!" He dropped the rag and wrung Johnny's hand when the latter had swung down. "You skinny chunk of greased lightnin'! Dang your hide, Johnny, this had better be for good!"

"It's for good," Johnny said. "Ma Hobbs still keep boarders?"

"She sure does. And if she's got a full house, she'll throw somebody out on his tail to make room for you. We were talking about you the other day. She'll blister you, boy, then cook you a special supper. Why in blazes did you run out on it, Johnny? You whipped three of 'em in a row, then high-tailed it. That don't make sense."

"Did I ever make sense?" Johnny asked. He let Slowgow take his horse and, carrying his war bag, he moved on up the street to Ma Hobbs' boarding house.

A portly, comfortable figure, Ma showed a welcome to match the liveryman's.

"You bet I got a room for you, Johnny. But dang you for a running, hangtail dog! Now she's marrying that Redburn! Out of spite, I tell you. Am I glad you got home in time!"

Johnny gave her his easy grin. "Nothing but your cooking brought me back, Ma. What's for supper?"

"You wait and see."

He carried his war bag to his old room, his throat tightening a little when he realized Ma had kept it for him a whole year. Needing the income. Probably cussing herself out privately each time she refused to let it out, cussing Johnny Lind. But keeping it the way he left it. He had lived here five years before he went away. Finally Ma, herself, had started hinting that he ought to move out. But to set himself up in his own household. With Jean.

Washed clean of trail dust and in fresh clothes, Johnny left Ma's and went downtown. Digger City lay under a high rim that had been part of an ancient river bed. This wedged into the sunlight now to drop a cool shadow on the locust-studded town.

Old Sam Delfel maintained a small and peaceful office in a downtown building since he had retired from active management of the cannery. It gave order to his life to have a place to go and hours to keep. Usually he passed the time with old cronies or in reading and attending to the few decisions that were still his to make.

Johnny found him alone. Since lettering on his door said, "Walk in," Johnny stepped inside without announcing himself. Canted back in a swivel chair, Sam

lowered a paper and turned his white head. Something showed in his eyes that Johnny recognized as less than surprise. Maybe it was pleasure, but that again might be his own imagination.

"Howdy, Johnny," Sam said. "Draw up a chair."

It was good to see the old fellow again. Johnny shoved his hat to the back of his head and sat down, hitching his chair close to Sam's desk. From his wallet he withdrew the newspaper clipping somebody had mailed him and dropped it on Sam's ink-stained desk blotter.

"Neat job of clipping there, Sam. You're getting right handy with scissors. Round-side here long enough, and it'll be paper dolls."

Without looking at it, Sam said, "What makes you think I cut that out?"

"You're the only one in Digger City who had my address. And that only because I wrote you where to send my last paycheck."

Sam grinned finally. "Well, it got you here. And you don't look too blamed mad about it. I got a job for you."

"Don't be too sure I'm not mad. And you had a job a year ago. I dimly recall it went to a man named Redburn. Mentioned in that newspaper clipping. He's going to marry your pretty and bad-tempered daughter, I gather."

Putting down the newspaper, Sam frowned. "This here's a different job. One your size."

CHAPTER TWO

Home to Hell

JOHNNY studied the snowy features. There was a new brooding in the eyes, a new and disturbing sag in the heavy cheeks. Retirement had not gone well with the old man. He wondered what had persuaded Sam to do it. Jean, likely, less concerned about her father than about Glenn Redburn. Sam had made his pile, and it must be a big one; putting him on the shelf was like drawing the fire in a steam engine. Cold metal could look awfully inert.

"What've you got for me, Sam?" Johnny asked.

Sam grinned fleetly. "Break up that wedding. Marry my girl, like you should have in the first place."

Johnny shoved to his feet, dragging his hat back to an even keel. He moved toward the door.

"You make bad jokes, Sam."

"Sit down, damn it! It's the first crow I've ate in forty years. There's people in this town'd give a thousand dollars to see what you're seeing. I been wrong as only a hot-headed old fool can be. I should've listened to your side of the story, which you wouldn't have given me even if I'd asked. But I should've been smart enough to dig it out for myself."

"That was a year ago, Sam," Johnny said. "A lot's happened since then. You've retired. Jean's getting married. I'm out of it."

"Dammit, do I have to eat the bill and feathers, too? You love her, don't you?"

"What's that got to do with it? To my notion, busting up a wedding's as bad as busting up a marriage. Anyhow, your daughter hates me."

"That's what you think. That's what I thought. That's what she thinks. And the three of us ain't got brains enough to fill a salve sample box. You don't have to do anything. Just let her know you've come back, and she'll back out on Glenn Redburn."

Johnny eased back toward the desk. "You got anything special on Redburn, Sam?"

"Nothing except I don't cotton to him. Figure it was him that talked Jean into making me retire. Now bedamned if I ain't got less say about the business I built up with my own hands than one of the

fish scalers out there. It's always, 'Now, don't worry about that! You just take it easy, Sam!' I don't like the way things're going out there, and I can't horn in anymore without riling Jean."

"And you figure the answer's simple. Just bust 'em up. Like to do you a favor, Sam, but I'm not having any of that."

Sam grinned at him. "You come back, didn't you? And I said I figured that was all it would take."

A RESTLESSNESS was in Johnny Lind when he descended the stairs and stepped onto the street. So Sam realized finally there had been more to that fracas than met the eye. That the fight could have been timed and forced just when it was to eliminate Johnny Lind as a contender for the cannery managership.

Sam had not figured to retire, then, but only to step up to a place where he could take it easier while keeping a firm hand on things. Johnny had been his plant foreman, and Glenn Redburn his office man. It had been a case of a highly schooled man against one mostly self-taught in the school of hard knocks. There had been rivalry for Jean, as well as for the newly created job. Redburn had won hands down.

Something that had seemed a minor circumstance had exploded at the critical moment, though Johnny had not suspected a conspiracy until too late. Sam Delfel was a genial, easy-going man, but there was one thing about which he was dangerously touchy. A man could raise all the hell he craved in off hours, but he had to be cold sober and on his toes on a job where food for human consumption was being prepared. The Delfel pack was a thing about which he felt as strongly as he did about the girl who bore his name. Johnny Lind had harbored the same feeling on both scores.

So Johnny had been rocked back on his heels the time Sam jumped him, one evening when he had dropped around to the Delfel house to see Jean.

"Dang your hide, Johnny, what do you think we're running out there? A fertilizer factory?"

It had been so unexpected, Johnny could do nothing but stare at him.

"In the White Queen brand, too!" Sam had fumed. "Filth in the cooking vats. I saw it with my own eyes!"

"When, Sam?" A spurt of rage put a brittleness in Johnny's voice.

"This afternoon! Yeah, while you were up to the falls! Call it spying, but I got the tip!" Sam's cheeks had puffed as more angry words seemed to lodge in his throat.

Johnny might have denied the implied charge of carelessness, and at that point Sam may have intended no more than a lacing down. Cleanliness in the cannery was Johnny's responsibility, no matter who was immediately to blame. But Sam now managed to get the rest out of his craw.

"And another thing! I seen a half empty whiskey bottle in your locker! You know I fire anybody who takes a drink on the job!"

At that point Jean had come down the stairs. Hearing her father's last words, she looked startled, letting her gaze travel to Johnny with some kind of inner relish. His drinking and what she called rowdiness had been the sore point between them. This, with something that had risen tauntingly in his own mind, had made Johnny reach for his hat. He banged out the door with no word of denial or explanation.

He had whipped three men, as fast as he could nail them—Rex Appleton whom he found over in Claret's saloon that same evening, Glenn Redburn at the cannery the next morning, and finally Os Legg, in the cannery yard. Appleton, his straw boss, was the only one who could have fouled the vats and called Sam's attention to it.

Os Legg, a cronie of Appleton's, had

been the one who asked Johnny to go up to the fishing ground with him to settle a dispute with the Indians that same afternoon. He had included Redburn because the picture had come clear suddenly. It had all been timed to rile Sam just when he was making his decision about the new managership everyone was waiting to see filled. Sam Delfel had ridden into the yard before the smoke cleared away.

The thing that clammed Johnny up in impotent fury was the fact that Sam took the thing at its face value. Yet later Johnny admitted that he had played the fool himself in barging two-fistedly into the trap that had been set for him. Sam swung out of saddle in bristling temper when he saw the whole crew watching two of his key men in a savage, rough-and-tumble fight. Probably he still rankled over the fact that Johnny had walked out in the middle of his lacing down the night before. Now Appleton, Legg and Redburn had stood solidly together in blaming it all on Johnny. At that point Sam did his firing. Before he pulled out of town, Johnny heard that Redburn had been given the managership.

So now Sam had reconsidered, was sorry, and wanted to change things. So now Johnny Lind was admitting his own dunderheaded responsibility and wondering if what he had considered to be only a limited strategy had not been a much bigger thing than he had suspected. Sam had not intended to retire but only to take it easier than he had for the greater part of his life. But now he was in virtual retirement by his own fretting admission. And Johnny had picked up his own suspicions that things were not going so well out at the cannery.

PAUSED on the sidewalk. Johnny hauled himself straight suddenly. A girl moved toward him without recognition. Jean Delfel was turning in to the stairs leading to her father's office when her sweeping glance settled on him. She halted. A hand lifted slightly and dropped. A smile tussled with a frown on her finely chiseled face. She took an involuntary step toward him.

"Why, Johnny! Johnny Lind!"

"Howdy, Jean," Johnny answered, and he tugged off his hat and smiled.

Jean's glance stopped at his chest. It darted from one broad shoulder to the other, then raised to him again.

"Well, this is a surprise. Been up to see Dad?"

"Dropped in, a minute ago."

"Are you going to be around a while?"

Johnny nodded. "Back to stay." He watched the frown nearly come to her forehead, then disappear. Blood climbed to his cheeks and beat in his ears. She was more profoundly moved by this moment than a girl should be who cared nothing about a man. He read it in a dozen ways behind the careful guardedness of her manner.

She smiled. "That's nice, Johnny. I'll be seeing you around, then." She gave him a nod, turned, and went lightly up the stairs.

Johnny turned away, scarcely aware of moving. He thought, *Maybe Sam's right. Maybe I could break it up, even yet.* He put the thought from him in distaste. A contract to marry was as sacred as the marriage itself. Jean had made her choice and publicly declared her intentions. He was out of it, and he would stay out.

As he turned down toward the river, Johnny recalled the strangely violent relationship that had always been between them. From the start. He grinned, not without a touch of resentment, at the names she had called him over the years. A ruffian, a show-off, a man with his brains in his fists.

Knowing his reckless temper, Jean Delfel had seemed to enjoy challenging it. And she could give as good as she got. Her eyes were like Sam's, her jaw as

square and unyielding. It made Johnny flinch even yet to recall the thing she had said to him after he had whipped Redburn.

"I'm something less than a cave-woman, Johnny Lind! I'm not necessarily fascinated by the strongest male in the woods. If somebody out there peached on you, what made you think you could square it by licking half the cannery? You'll notice even Dad was unimpressed!"

A proud girl, Jean Delfel. Hating Johnny Lind because she felt herself too strongly drawn to him, because he represented the things from which she was trying to escape. Johnny had always sensed it, roweled and turned even more so by the awareness. Living the wild, vigorous life Sam had lived until age began to settle him. Drinking and gambling in the riverfront deadfalls. Fighting and carousing, as she called it.

Some fine kinship had run between Sam and Johnny from the start, which made a ruckus, when it came, all the more devastating. Johnny could barely remember the only home he had ever had. He had been making his own way and fighting his own battles when most boys were concerned only with their skill with a slingshot. The rough grinding of a life like that had put no polish on him.

Sam seemed to have felt some of this. His own life had been much the same. He had built a big, successful business and made money for himself, but the doing had been the end with him. He had no pride nor pretense. Until Jean was grown they had continued to live in the old, tumbledown house near the cannery.

It was in high school that Jean learned there were social levels in the town. She hadn't belonged, and she must have charged this to her father. Sam Delfel was a roughneck and proud of it.

Afterward, it had been at Jean's behest that they built the house in town. The big house, one of the best in Digger City. And Jean Delfel quit riding on the fish wagon and hanging around the clanking, smelling cannery. She became a lady. And Glenn Redburn was a stone shined more to her tastes.

Johnny Lind realized gloomily that the pleasure had gone out of his homecoming. He turned and retraced his route to Ma Hobbs' boarding house.

CHAPTER THREE

A Man Called Redburn

HE WAS propped up on his bed, late that evening, reading the Digger City weekly paper, when he heard Ma's loud voice downstairs.

"Why, he's up in his room, Sam. What do you suppose happened to him up in the cow country to turn him into a stay-at-home?"

Johnny knew the heavy tread on the stairs was Sam's. He called as the old man's steps hit the landing, and Sam shoved open the door and came in. He wore a hang-dog grin.

"Looked around downtown for you, Johnny. How come you're home this time of evening?"

Johnny put down the newspaper and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Business or pleasure on your mind, Sam?"

The old man's grin broadened. "Figured you might be welcoming yourself back, boy. Lot of people in this town'd like to bend a elbow with you tonight."

It reached Johnny, the depths of the old man's loneliness. So he had got thinking that on Johnny Lind's first night home there would be much ado in the old haunts. It had brought him out. Who had put this crimp on Sam Delfel, and why?

"Sam, you been down to Nick Claret's lately?"

"Well, not lately."

"Why not, Sam?"

Reluctance and embarrassment and rising temper mixed in Sam's eyes. "Getting to be a stay-at-home myself, that's all, blast it."

"Sam, let's go hunt up the boys."

For an instant hunger showed starkly in Sam's eyes. "Well, mebbe I could stand a hour or so of something like that."

Johnny was frowning as he replaced his tie and shrugged into his coat. Sam wasn't going to talk about it. Maybe he was ashamed of letting the daughter he doted on lead him around by the nose. Maybe he had realized at last that Jean, herself, might have something to be ashamed of, depending on the point of view.

The daughter who had renounced being a roughneck herself, who was going to marry a man of polish and take a high place in this town. He loved that girl; he would do anything for her.

They found much of the old crowd in Nick Claret's, down on Water Street. Johnny's welcome was warm and noisy and heart-felt, and he noted that they were a little surprised at seeing Sam there with Johnny Lind. This crowd knew about the ruckus at the cannery. It had its own ideas. Everyone knew about the wedding just two weeks away, and entertained private opinions on that subject, too. Yet none of this showed on the surface, and they made it a big evening.

It was not until they were ready to leave, shortly after midnight, that Johnny grew aware that Sam had taken on a load. He had never shown it in the old days. Johnny walked home with him, having a definite purpose in mind.

He was not surprised that the living-room window of the Delfel house still showed light. He was less surprised that Jean was up and waiting for her father. A guilty defiance climbed into Sam's eyes as they stepped into the lamplight, and Johnny Lind was squarely back of the rebellion. Anger showed plainly on Jean's face.

"Up to old tricks already, eh?" she asked.

Sam met her stare. "It's been a long time since I dusted the back side of your skirt, girl," he said thoughtfully. With a grin to Johnny, he turned and mounted the stairs.

Jean followed Johnny to the porch. "Johnny Lind, I wish to Heaven you'd had the decency to stay away from this town," she breathed.

He whirled, anger shooting through him. Without words, he reached for her and pulled her roughly to him. She beat both fists to his face, then was limp suddenly. He felt her lips respond, he could feel the wild hammering of her heart against his chest. She pulled back and whirled and ran through the door. Its slam made a beating wave against his eardrums.

HE WAS only half aware of recrossing town to Ma Hobbs'. He had meant to complete the rupture permanently in all he had done, this night. As far as she was concerned, he had no doubt that he had. But with regard to Johnny Lind, it was now a different matter.

He was in a mood to cinch up his war bag and ride again the next morning. The vague hungers, the glinting hopes that had brought him back were distasteful when he wakened to a spill of midmorning light in his bedroom. He picked at all the half understood purposes guiding him. Perhaps he had hoped that Jean had had something to do with the clipping about the wedding. Possibly he had wanted a miracle and was seeing now the strict, impersonal reality. There was no longer substance to these motives; staying could only cause him regret.

Yet there was something wrong here, deeply wrong. Jean apparently had been glad to see him banished a year ago; she was patently upset by his return. She had ambitions for the graces to go with her

father's money, and she aimed to work them out.

She could be as unyielding as Sam could be, as could be Johnny Lind, himself. But with the freshened perspective that follows sleep, Johnny was wondering if at the bottom it was not Glenn Redburn's ambition. Understanding Jean and shaping her to his own purposes. In either event, the net result was unhappiness for Sam.

That was what Johnny cared about. Once his temper had cooled, following the ruckus, he had recognized an abiding fondness for the old hellion. The two-fisted fire-eater of the breed that could make the worst kind of doting father. Sam would do anything for Jean. Maybe he knew or guessed more about what caused the push in her than anyone else did. Whatever it was, it had Sam hog-tied.

Johnny slipped out of Ma Hobbs' house to save her the chore of an extra, late breakfast. Sam was not at his office, and Johnny went on to the house. It was another beautiful day, morning sun dripping through the thick leaves of the trees. Sam was in the parlor, reading a paper and looking grumpy. Jean was not there, and Johnny sensed he had put friction in this house.

"Sam, I thought maybe you'd like to go fishing with me," Johnny said.

But Sam's moment of rebellion was over. He studied the suggestion vacantly, then shook his head. "Reckon not, Johnny. Got some chores, today."

Johnny heard the light fall of a foot somewhere upstairs. It was Jean, and she would be listening maybe. Wondering what further deviltry Johnny Lind had come to work. He said, "Sam, you made a big mistake in letting them shelve you."

"My own idea, boy. I'm getting old."

Johnny shrugged, gave Sam a thoughtful nod, and left.

His pulses quickened as he rode into the cannery yard an hour later. Close in, his impresion of careless management was stronger than it had been from the road the day before. There was litter in the big yard and on the loading platforms. The windows were grimy with hand marks and dust.

The whole place lacked the clean freshness it had had in Johnny's day. He wondered why Sam tolerated it, for he must come out here occasionally. There had been a time when conditions like this would have blown him sky-high, as nobody knew better than Johnny Lind.

IT STRUCK him as he dismounted that Sam had simply given up, grown indifferent. Tired of bucking a strong-willed daughter and whatever it was they were doing to him. The thought was like a chill wind through Johnny. Men like Sam, robbed of direction, usually broke up fast.

He had stopped by only out of impulse, on his way to the fishing ground. He left the horse and angled across the sun-beaten yard to the little building that housed the office. Stepping in, he saw with some surprise that there was no new office clerk to replace Redburn. Redburn was in the little cubicle Sam used to occupy, with a ledger spread out into which he was frowning thoughtfully.

When he looked up, Redburn let a vacant glance drift through the open door. He came alert suddenly and frowned at Johnny. Plain wariness came to his face when Johnny walked on in.

"Hello, Johnny." Redburn's lack of surprise showed he had heard Johnny was back.

They were the same age, yet where Johnny was tall Redburn was wedgy and lithe. He had a good-looking face that Johnny conceded was strong enough. His eyes were cool and steady, with something perpetually truculent glinting in them. His Jaw set as he met Johnny's gaze.

"You run a crumby place, Redburn," Johnny said. "You'll recall Sam fired me

because he found the cooking vats messy. Just once. I don't think you've forgotten that, have you?" A cool grin lay on his lips.

Redburn's gaze narrowed on Johnny's eyes. "When I took a whipping for it? Johnny, it wasn't till the smoke cleared away that I knew what it was all about. At first I figured you included me simply because I beat your time with Jean. Later, I realized you figured I'd helped frame you. Maybe you were framed, and maybe not. But if you were, I had nothing to do with it. I'd like you to understand that."

Johnny stared at him. To his surprise, the man sounded genuinely sincere, It astonished him further to realize he hoped Redburn was, since Jean was soon to marry him. He shrugged lightly. "It makes no difference, now."

"The place looks bad," Redburn agreed cheerfully. "The reason is that Rex Appleton was the only one who could take your place. And he's never been able to cut it like you did. I can't run his job for him, and I can't find anybody else. Sam raises hell all the time, but he realizes that. Johnny, I'd like to let bygones be bygones and have you come back."

It took the wind out of Johnny Lind. Again he was having a moment's clarity in reflecting how unthinking strong fists could be. Redburn had always been decent enough on the job, though boldly competitive when it came to Jean. So maybe it had been a cheap little frame-up, with Appleton wanting his job, with a hot-headed Johnny Lind building the molehill into a mountain. Well, Appleton had been whipped for it, too. The score was settled, as far as Johnny was concerned.

He shook his head. "Spent the winter in a line shack, up east. Want to loaf a while and maybe fish a little." He walked out with a humbled sense. A man knew so little about the reality surrounding him; he knew next to nothing about himself, he mused.

CHAPTER FOUR

Get Out of Town!

HE WAS still puzzled as he rode on up to Hour-Glass Falls. Topping the last rise on the rolling brown plain, he straightened in the saddle. Os Legg's wagon was at the cable anchor, the usual cluster of Indians about him, the salmon glistening in the sun. The breeze here by the falls carried its moist touch of river spray, beaten up by the enormous stretch of ruptures along the length of the fishing ground. A few white clouds slipped along under the depthless sky.

Os Legg swung to look at Johnny as the latter rode up. The deep bin of his wagon was nearly loaded, the fishermen nearly cleared out. The Indians stepped up to his platform scale in turn, sometimes with only one or two salmon held by scaly fingers hooked into the gills. The luckier ones had bulging wet gunny sacks. Johnny saw impassive eyes on him, a few reactions of greeting. The red men had liked him in the old days, and he had sometimes had to iron out the wrinkles in their relations with the cannery which Legg was forever creating.

There were no arguments at the moment, which was unusual. Legg weighed each catch, quickly filling out a receipt that could be redeemed for cash at the cannery. When the last Indian had started on his way across the cables to the rocks, Legg looked at Johnny.

"What brings you out here, Johnny?"

Johnny didn't answer. Stepping forward, he lifted himself onto the platform of the scales. Frowning, Legg moved impulsively forward, then held himself still. He scowled thoughtfully while Johnny pronged a weight onto the dangling hook, then inched the slider along the beam. Johnny gave him a cool glance when he stepped off.

"This country's sure torn the stuffing

out of me, Os. I've lost sixteen pounds since I hit here, yesterday."

Legg locked the scales. Lifting them lightly, he swung them onto the wagon. They were habitually hauled back and forth to prevent tampering by the Indians. He spat elaborately, then brought his sharp gaze back to Johnny.

"It sure don't look like it's healthy for you around here, Johnny. It sure don't." Johnny's quick move had caught him flat-footed. Uneasiness and temper and struggling thought worked in his narrowed eyes. "How come you rode all the way out here to weigh yourself?"

"Impulse, Os. Never see a pair of scales but what I have to step onto 'em. Weighed myself in Prairie Junction, the other day. Tilted the beam at a hundred seventy-six. Down to a hundred sixty, this morning. That figures out about ten pounds on the hundred. A lot to lose in a week."

"No doubt you're wasting away, Johnny. Was I you, I'd go back where it's healthier." Legg swung up onto the front wheel and lifted himself to the wagon seat. Without looking at Johnny again, he picked up the reins and the wagon rattled away.

Johnny stared after him for a long moment. He was surprised less at Legg than at the implications. The Indians had always fussed about cannery weights, but even Sam had been unable to find anything wrong with Legg's scales when he pulled a surprise check on the cannery end of the fish haul. That meant Legg had worked out a way of changing the setup quickly so they were accurate except when he wanted them otherwise. A special set of tampered weights could accomplish that.

Os Legg would simply deny that the incident had occurred, if Johnny should decide to report it. He would be trap-wary from here on. And inclined to be mean about the whole thing. He would not be apt to give it up, if he could help it. Some two million pounds of salmon were lifted out of this river stretch each season. Legg apparently was cutting himself in for a flat ten percent, since Delfel was the only buyer here. The price this season, was three cents. Johnny whistled when he calculated it would net some six thousand dollars a year. A tempting morsel for a man of Os Legg's calibre, and in a few seasons it would amount to a young fortune.

But Legg would have to have help. Some obliging Indian, possibly, to whom he could issue fake tickets for the dishonest cut, to be cashed at the cannery and turned over to Legg again. Or help inside the cannery, from a man privy to the books and empowered to disburse cash. Which in all logic would be Glenn Redburn; which possibly accounted for the fact that Redburn had not taken on a new office man to replace himself.

IT GAVE Johnny a cold feeling to contemplate it. If this was all true, a fast, forced examination of the books might show something. But why would Redburn, who was set to marry Sam's daughter and come into complete control of the business, resort to a comparatively piddling scheme like this?

Johnny tied his horse at the cableway anchor. There was no telling how long Legg had been working the graft, one way or another. He had always had a rough hand with the Indians, but because he was otherwise a good man at the pesky job, Sam had tolerated that, warning Legg when he overdid it. As foreman of the cannery, Johnny had had no control over outside matters, though he had heard annoying things occasionally. Ruminating, he picked up the tow line and pulled the swinging box, suspended from the tight cable by pulleys, across from the mid-stream rock.

He made his way out to the first rocks, pulling himself by hand as the conveyor

swung high above the tumbling guts of the river. The cables fingered out in every direction; for a hundred rock islands thrust up in this stricture, each cable with its car squealing small in the roar of the river. Sun and shadow checkered its strong pattern on the reaches.

Away from Legg, the Indians on the first offshore rock gave Johnny their wooden greetings. He looked up Walking Crow, the young chief of the tribe that came here each year to fish through spring, summer and fall. To Johnny's surprise, the Indian betrayed a faint show of hostility.

"You back at cannery, Johnny?"

When Johnny shook his head, Walking Crow eased, spat and began to talk in guttural temper. His tribe, he said, knew there was cheating going on and had had enough of it. The fishing grounds were theirs eternally by treaty rights—the treaty that had confined them to the reservation and made them dependent on white man's economy. It was no longer sufficient that they fish only for food, as they had done from ancient times. They had many other needs now growing out of their confinement, civilized needs for which they had to have money.

The Indian agent had tried to check on their complaints of abuse and cheating by the cannery and had gotten nowhere. The Indians had no proof, and so the cannery had only to deny it. The cannery was their only market, and it insisted on naming the terms under which it would deal. But there was brooding and ugly talk on the fishing platforms, and in the longhouse and flimsy hovels at night. Something was going to be done soon.

Johnny Lind could do nothing but express sympathy and try to form his own plans. He said nothing of what he had discovered about Os Legg's scales, for he also would have to show proof. He fished all afternoon, sharing the small wooden platforms built out over the channels, sweeping the current as the Indians did with the long-handled dipnets. The salmon run teeming the swift waters was on its way to the spawning grounds in upcountry tributaries and lakes, the strange demand in each silvery member to reproduce where it had itself been hatched.

These falls, some six miles in length and often twenty feet high at the steps, could not stop them. The bruising rocks, the mauling currents, the craftily scooping nets: all these they ignored in the mighty, up-current struggle. From the sea, where they had grown from fingerlings, they threaded hundreds of miles of this.

Into this cycle of plenty, the red men dipped rhythmically, the round nets sweeping and scooping, lifting threshing burdens to the little platforms. Salmon spilling out, a short, heavy club rapping expertly across a gasping head, the net descending swiftly again.

It was bounty not without price. The river was said to turn on its edge here. The deep, surging channels were lethal to those who lost their balance and plummeted screaming from the platform. The Indians accepted this hazard in exchange for food and the money civilization made necessary to them.

Johnny started for shore in late afternoon, still uncertain in mind. The bright yellow sun, descending upon the bare, distant hills, now lent a shadowed vermilion to the river's lower reach. Shadows running over the rolling prairie touched somberness to this.

The Indians, sensitive to these brooding moods of nature, began to stow their tackle. Dark and untouchable things ran on the river at night. Now they wanted the warmth and close companionship of their hovels.

RETURNING to Digger City, Johnny rode at once to Sam Delfel's house, undecided as to what he would say but wanting to feel Sam out to see if he had

any suspicions to match his own. He hoped Sam did, for then the thing could be brought out and worked at. Otherwise, in view of the circumstance, he hated to reveal what might pull Glenn Redburn into its sinister clutch. Johnny pulled up at the curb in open mouthed amazement.

The windows of the front, uncurtained, glared on what patently were empty rooms. Dropping a glance to the street, he saw the plain marks of many wagon wheels, running back against the curb, pulling out. A lettered box board was tacked to one of the white porch pillars, announcing, "For Sale. See Sam Delfel at cannery."

Johnny swung down, running a palm absently across his chin. In three-quarters of a day, this. He would have been no more surprised to find the town turned about for end. Yet he recalled Sam's touchy brooding that morning, and his mention of chores to do.

He saw that a woman was peering at him curiously from behind a curtain, at the neighboring house to the right. Johnny strode at an angle across the clipped yards. The woman came to the door instantly at his knock, the look of commonly shared mystery engendered clearly in her eyes.

"You've got me!" she boomed, in response to Johnny's question. "Been wagons coming and going all afternoon. Every van in town and some from the cannery. They sure never said anything to me about intending to move. Mrs. Jergens, on the other side of them, had the idea maybe they moved back out to the cannery. That old shack out there always stood empty, you know."

Johnny thanked her absently and left. So Sam's rebellion, started last night when Johnny Lind took him down to Nick Claret's for a snootful, had continued. Johnny recalled the old man's wistful hope that his return would be enough to break up the impending marriage. But the sign had clearly indicated that it would not. What Sam had once been willing to do for his daughter, he was no longer willing to do. When he had revolted he had blown the lid sky-high.

Remounting, Johnny swung out of town on the cannery road. Dusk was running in rapidly now, closing its soft black pincers over the bare sweeps. He let his horse pound, though he failed to understand the hurry in himself. If Jean had bowed to Sam's will and gone with him, she would be difficult to face. Recalling Sam's threat to dust her petticoats, he had a feeling that Jean had given in.

He saw the lamplight in the old Delfel house when he crested the hill south of the cannery. The place had been vacant and disintegrating for nearly three years. Distantly, through the window, Johnny saw the clutter of piled furniture. The porch was covered with more. He caught a glimpse, then, of Jean. Approaching, he failed to catch sight of Sam's big figure.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell Above the River

RIDING into town earlier by the distant main road, Johnny had not noticed this activity. Now he regretted his impulse to investigate the strangely vacant house in town. Hearing his horse, Jean was waiting on the porch, small fists placed squarely on her slender hips. For a moment she stared at him through the dim light from the house, drawing a guilty grin to his lips.

"A wonderful thing you've started, Johnny Lind," she breathed, at last. "A lovely mess you've made of everything."

Johnny swung down. "Where's Sam?"

"How do I know? He's here, there and everywhere. He's gone crazy. What've you cooked up that brings you out here now?"

"I only wanted to shake Sam's hand,

girl. He should've done it a long time ago. I'm only surprised the high and mighty Miss Delfel would knuckle down."

"Do you think I want it spread all over town that he's gone wild? What could I do but pretend it was planned all along? He can live here with cobwebs in his hair. He can sell the town place if he likes. When I'm married I'll have my own house, anyhow." Jean pulled herself taller. "And if you ever come within a mile of it, Johnny Lind, I'll let go with a scatter gun!"

"Girl," said Johnny cheerfully, "that would be a mean way to greet your husband when he comes home."

Weight sounded on the earth at a distance. A figure emerged from the shadows—Rex Appleton, the thin, middle-aged cannery foreman who owed his job to undercutting Johnny Lind. Johnny stiffened in the saddle to stare at him.

"You seen Sam, Jean?" Appleton asked, ignoring Johnny. There was worry in his flat voice.

"Enough to last a lifetime."

"Her manners aren't working good, tonight," Johnny told Appleton. "It upsets her having company with the house torn up and all. Rex, I been thinking. You better get used to the idea of being strawboss again. Or nothing, hereabouts. Sam and me've declared us a moving day."

"When you run down," Appleton said, "I'd like to say I'm uneasy about Sam. I come over to check with Jean. Walking Crow came down from the Siwash village about dark. Sam talked to him a spell. Thought I seen Sam riding off toward the fishing grounds with that Injun, a while ago. But I wasn't sure. It's no place for Sam to be at night, when them redskins've been like hornets all season."

"Good lord," Johnny breathed, and he noted Jean's sharply indrawn breath.

Johnny swung toward his horse and clawed up to the saddle. He pulled the animal around, driving in heels and sending it pounding across the cannery yard. A wild alarm surged through him. So Walking Crow had come in for a showdown, at last, catching Sam out here.

If Sam had gone up to the village, it had probably been to talk with the leaders in the longhouse, to reassure them and promise an investigation. Probably Sam did not completely realize the tense situation up there, nor that the Indians hated him as the one responsible for the trouble. A wrong move on Sam's part could blow up the fishing grounds.

Then Johnny was grabbing the saddle horn as he felt himself sway with shock. Os Legg would have made a couple of trips to the falls after he saw that Sam was moving kit and baggage out to the cannery. He could have egged Walking Crow into bearding Sam. It was only a speculative apprehension, but it chilled Johnny.

JOHNNY let his horse slope out, eating up the miles of the river bank road. He passed the falls, skirting the Indian camp, and hauled down the horse in sight of the big longhouse. A buck came from a doorway to the edge of the road at the mount's clattering approach.

"Where's Walking Crow?" Johnny demanded.

The Indian pointed to nearby hovel.

"He been down to the cannery, this evening? He bring Sam Delfel up here?"

The buck shook his head. "Walking Crow sleep since sundown. Fish early tomorrow. I know."

Johnny didn't wait to confirm it with the chief himself. He knew now that Appleton's story was fabricated. It was some kind of bait. Maybe Sam wasn't even up here, maybe the story had been designed only to get Johnny Lind out in the dark. Os Legg hated and feared Johnny Lind; he had a lot of tracks to cover. Johnny swung his horse, regretting that his gun was in his war bag in Digger City.

He was abreast the cable anchor when a mounted figure jumped a horse out from behind a huge trailside boulder. Os Legg's voice, rasping above the steady drone of the falls, was no surprise to Johnny:

"I got a gun on you, Lind. Swing down!"

Johnny's tongue clung to his palate.

"Johnny," Legg said, "I could drop you now and throw your carcass into the falls. I could blame it on the Siwashes. Sam's out on the big rock, tied up. It could be they got their hands on him, and you played fool enough to try and help him. Appleton's seen to that, I take it, or you wouldn't be here. You and Sam always was cronies, Johnny. I know you come back to spy for him. But I know you ain't got in any damage, yet. And you ain't going to."

Johnny swung down. Maybe Sam was a prisoner over on the rock and maybe not. Legg realized Johnny had lacked time and chance to talk to Sam since discovering the short-weighting. So there probably was proof to be found should anybody start a real investigation.

Legg swiveled in the saddle suddenly. A horse bulged out of the dark. Before Johnny could move, Legg spoke sharply.

"That you, Rex? You toook your time getting here."

"The damned girl," Appleton said, scarcely lifting his flat voice. "She was bound to come with me. Had a time talking her out of it."

"You check on Redburn?"

"He's still in the office. Scared stiff. I don't trust that huckleberry, Os."

"When he finds out about this, he'll have to play ball." Legg swung down. "Head for the cable, Johnny. We're sending you over first. You'll be harmless over there, unless you can swim in water no redskin ever crawled out of alive. Get going."

Johnny trudged toward the cableway, the pair following on foot. He tried to think, but the cold touch of fear froze him up. Death could come to Sam Delfel and Johnny Lind this night, and the stage was set to lay it onto the Indians. The story would be readily accepted. Whites were quick to believe the worst of the reds. These were men facing jail, ready to kill to escape that.

THE CONVEYOR was on this side. Johnny entered willingly, anxious now to see if Sam was really over there in the darkness beyond the swirling, clattering gut of the White. He balanced the box easily. He kept his hands off the cable, letting them pull him by the lighter line that ran in a long continuity through pulleys on either end. Jerkily he crossed in the swaying box, the night river breeze striking sharply against him, adding to the chill of raw fear.

He swung out instantly when the box touched the far side. It started back. He moved swiftly now, wanting to find Sam if he were here and free him. Legg had a gun, but Johnny and Sam could make it hard for the others to land on this side. He found Sam at once, and saw that the old man was unconscious, lying on his side in a nest formed of shielding rocky points. Johnny wheeled back to the cableway.

The cable was drilled and set into solid rock; it would be impossible to loosen it without tools. The pulley threaded by the towline whirled swiftly now. Johnny cast about for a small sliver of stone to wedge into the block. He found one and drove it in.

They dislodged it instantly by reversing direction when the conveyor stopped. The wedge clattered on the rock footing, bounced on into the river far below. Johnny cast about for another. They made it a duel then, patient and deadly. Each time Johnny fouled the tackle, they cleared it, gaining considerably on him while he hunted up pieces of chipped basalt.

Then the direction was reversed, and one of them was coming across. It would be Legg. Johnny grabbed the rope desperately, but two men were pulling against him.

Then the rope slipped through his hands, scorching his palms.

He spun across the rough rock toward Sam again, remembering belatedly that like many oldsters he probably carried a pocket knife. He patted Sam's pockets, rolling him a little, and found the hard shape he sought. Fishing out the knife, he scrambled back to the anchor post. The conveyor was coming steadily on, although as yet he could see no form out in the black space above the channel.

He opened the knife and slashed at the gliding tow line, feeling it fray as the dragged sharp edge of the blade sawed into it. Then the line parted, running limply out of the block close to Johnny's hand. He heard nothing, but knew the longer, severed end of the line had dropped into the river.

He leaned against the post with hammering heart. The conveyor could only be pulled back to the other side. Or the box's occupant could bring himself on by using the cable, pulling hand over hand. Johnny placed fingers on the twisted wire of the cable, waiting for it to telegraph movement.

In a few seconds he felt it, the dim vibration that was the inert material's only life. Though he still could not see the conveyor, he knew it was coming on. Legg and Appleton had gone too far now to back out. Daybreak must see their task finished.

When he saw the conveyor's shape taking form out of the masking night, Johnny held another piece of broken basalt in his hand. He knew it was Os Legg. He meant to pit a thrown rock against Legg's gun. He saw Legg was using only one hand to pull himself. The gun would be ready in the other.

Then Legg's voice raveled through the roar of the falls. "Don't try nothing, Johnny. I'll drill you. Even the Injuns over in the village wouldn't notice it in all this racket. Even if they did, they're scared of this stretch after dark."

Johnny knew that was true, and he expected no help from them. "Stand off, Legg," he warned. "I'll spill you in the gut, if I can."

He hurled the stone at a menacing move, and in the same second heard the crack of a gun, its brilliance fuzzed in the enveloping uproar. He had to eschew the anchor post's slim shelter in the motion, and something cold bloomed on his left thigh. He knew that Legg had aimed for his trunk in the bad light and had made it a little too low.

At the same time, he heard his hurtling stone chunk against the conveyor box. He supported himself by the post, watching the conveyor sway wildly on the blocks. He had connected, upsetting Legg's precarious balance out there, perhaps stunning him, throwing panic into him.

Legg was clawing with both hands at the cable. He caught and held, and within seconds the box settled into balance again. Reaction slammed through Johnny then, and a partly relaxed hand slid down the splintered surface of his support. He dimly saw Legg looping his way in with bold, triumphant movements.

CHAPTER SIX

Red Runs the River

JOHNNY shoved to his knees as Legg made shore, swinging boldly onto the rock. He loomed above Johnny, and the latter thought in a flash of muddled hope that the impact of the stone had at least caused Legg to release his hold on the gun. He drove forward for the man's knees.The collision sent Legg backward, tangled and flailing his big arms. Legg went down

hard on the rock, and Johnny held on with all his power.

The small success helped clear the shock from Johnny's brain. Legg tried to kick him off, with Johnny ignoring the punishment of the driving boots. He knew that he had to tip the balance between life and death with his own bare hands, and Sam's life was in the balance with his own.

Os Legg came up in a mighty spasm of energy, kicking Johnny off, getting his knees under him and shoving half erect. Johnny shoved back now, knowing an instant of awful doubt. But the flesh wound in his thigh, he discovered, was scarcely more than a stinging awareness now. The leg held its weight. Relief made a flashing exultation, and he drove toward Legg with all raw hate in him. He forced Legg backward and toward the lip of the rock. Legg had sucked him into it, drawing him and shoving aside in the last split second, hoping for the impetus to carry Johnny over.

Johnny heeled, following Legg, bent and fixed with deadly concentration on the power of his driving arms. He was glad in this moment of their previous, furious fight, for it had given him a crude estimate of Legg's measure. Now he broke through the man's defense time after time. He drove him into a spilling sprawl, from which Legg recovered in a spasm of alarmed energy. Momentarily the man was dropping the crude science he knew, resorting to brute stamina and strength.

He dropped Johnny hard on his thighs, and the jolt in his spine was paralyzing. Johnny never straightened completely as he pushed up. Bent low, he drove forward, meeting Legg's guard and crashing through. His shoulder sank into the man's belly, his long arms scooped. He put exquisite care into his balance, using Legg to steady himself even while the man's fingers closed on his throat.

He heaved up, lifting Legg's feet from the rock. He turned with swiftly gathering momentum, so that Legg's body stretched and straightened under the force. His game leg tangled then and let go. But before he dropped he released Legg, shoving himself hard aside in his spill. Legg landed beside him, face down in a dizzy, unbroken splat. Johnny was on his back in a fast scramble, lifting the head by the hair and shoving it into the rock. When he let go, the head fell in dead weight, and Johnny climbed swayingly to his feet.

He saw the dim, twisting shape of Sam Delfel and brought his mind slowly back to reality. He had dropped the knife and couldn't find it. He lurched across the rough footing and pulled the gag from Sam's mouth. He began to work at the knots with trembling fingers.

"If you'd pulled the gag out aforehand," Sam grumbled, "I could've anyhow rooted for you. The only thing I'm a mite curious about, son, is what the devil this is about."

For the first time Johnny realized that Sam, taken completely by surprise by an employee he had trusted, probably had no conception of this grim and terrible thing. Working at the knots on the old man's wrists and ankles, Johnny explained it.

"Well, I'm not surprised," Sam said, finally, as he climbed stiffly to his feet. "I cut me out a day's work, today, son. but I didn't know I was going to scare so many buzzards out of the brush. Legg found me in the office just at dark, and told me the Injuns was getting out of hand. Wanted me to come up for a talk with Walking Crow at the longhouse.

"It was full dark by the time we got to the cableway. Danged if he didn't throw down on me. Made me cross over first. When he got over, he rapped me one on the head afore I knew what was coming." He bent again to feel of Os Legg. "Hoped you'd killed him, but I'm scared you didn't. The cuss is still breathing."

"You tie him up with his own rope,

Sam," Johnny said. "I got another chore, Appleton's still over on the other side."

He went to the cableway, weak now, and trembling. Legg's gun was not in the box. He lifted himself into the conveyor, his leg beginning to pain him as he settled into position. He gripped the cable and began to pull. Presently there was black night all about him, the sky masked except for a single small rift showing no stars, the line of the cable drawn above his head. Eighteen inches at a time, he drew himself shoreward, the river's roar grinding in his ears, the delicate sway of the box a thing he balanced and counterbalanced by the tensions in his own body.

When he made out the dim shape of the river bank he did not slacken his steady motion. By coming in boldly, he would assume the semblance of Legg until Appleton discovered the difference.

THEN a voice rapped out sharply from the bank, "That you, Legg?"

Despair drained Johnny. It was not the voice of Rex Appleton but of Glenn Redburn. So he had come up here; so there were two of them to face instead of one. He knew now that making shore would be impossible, unless he could trick them. Dominating them in his weakened, crippled condition was impossible. Yet he kept on, pulling himself hand over hand.

"Legg," Redburn's voice pronounced again. "Answer me!"

The conveyor touched the anchor post and Johnny spilled himself out of it, landing on all fours on the ground. He shoved up, and in the next second weight hit him. It was the muscular, wedgy shape of Redburn, who, drawing no answer, seem to have decided on swift attack. Johnny sledged at him with his fists, driving him away from the sheer rock lip above the river.

"Johnny!" Redburn gasped. "Johnny Lind! It's you! For God's sake, Johnny, stop it! Let me talk! I just beat Rex Appleton senseless. I'd have come over to help you, but the towline was gone!"

Dazedly, Johnny stilled the surging drives in him. Spindle-legged and panting, he stared at Redburn through the obscurity. Redburn, breaking it off instantly, dragged the still shape of Appleton into sight.

"I damned near let them do it," Redburn said brokenly now. "I damned near let them scare me into it!"

Johnny went slack against the anchor post, too numbed to think. It was like pulling yarn from a snarl, to which there was no end.

"What made you change your mind, Redburn?"

"Maybe the fact that I'm not quite the crumb you think I am. But bad enough. I'm ready to admit it. They were blackmailing me, Johnny—slow, bleeding blackmail. I never plotted anything with them. They'd pull their stinking little stunts, then dare me to do anything about it. But this—this was more than I could swallow. They even meant to tell me about it only after they'd done it. But this time I could guess what was coming."

"You better start at the beginning," Johnny said. "Then we'll get Sam home. It's kind of cold out there at night."

Redburn talked willingly, making no effort to spare himself. He had had no part in the plot that cost Johnny his job. He made no claim that he had not wanted the managership. He had, desperately. But, left with the full responsibility of the cannery on his own shoulders, he had quickly learned he was less of a cannery man than he supposed.

This was what Legg and Appleton wanted. They helped him. It was Legg who suggested finally that, working through Jean, he get Sam completely out of the picture. Realizing the thin ice on which he was treading, Redburn had quickly agreed.

Then came the bite, and he was com-

pletely in their power. If at any moment one of them went to Sam with the true story concerning Glenn Redburn's qualifications, Redburn would lose the job in spite of Jean. So Redburn had to let them have a free hand with things.

He himself had had nothing to do with the weight-chiseling on the Indians, beyond suspecting it and keeping quiet. He had salved his conscience with the fact that it was not costing the cannery anything. Ever so often Os Legg would cash fish tickets of considerable value, made out in the name of an Indian Redburn knew to be fictitious.

When Sam Delfel had shown open revolt that day, Redburn had been frightened sick. Legg had come in late in the afternoon and told him not to worry. Again he had not mentioned his intentions, and Redburn knew better than to ask them. When, late in the evening, Jean had come over to the cannery with word that both Sam and Johnny had gone to the Indian village, Redburn began to see through it. He knew then that he had to intercede, though it meant being exposed, disgraced and washed up with Jean.

"They would have told me the truth, afterward," Redburn concluded dismally. "It would have given them their hold on me for the rest of their lives. It would all be Jean's, with Sam out of the way. She'd taken to hating the cannery the last few years. She'd let me run it, with no interference or questions. And Legg and Appleton would have bled me white. Because they figured I'd keep still, like I did about the other thing. I'd be an accessory to murder. Completely in their power."

Johnny shoved away from the post supporting him, less angry than he had expected to be. Redburn had at least met the big and final test decently enough. No man was perfect, and since Jean Delfel had given her heart to this one, Johnny figured he was worth salvaging.

"They'll go on trial for attempted murder, now, Glenn. You had a big hand in stopping that, because I don't know if I could have handled Appleton, had I found him here able-bodied. If he'd beat me, he would've finished what Legg started. He would have had to. Tell Sam and Jean the truth about the rest, yourself. Then the other two'll have nothing to hurt you with, if they decide to try it."

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"I've already told Jean," Redburn answered. "She's true-blue, and I guess you know it, Johnny. She said that since I turned man in the end, it made no difference to her. She'd come along, except I took the last horse. But, Johnny, you're the man for her. I know it, and I think she does, now."

Johnny Lind wheeled about. "Come on. We got us a couple of men to get over from that rock."

IT WAS the small hours of morning before they were all back at the cluttered old Delfel house at the cannery. Legg and Appleton were recovered, but were bound securely, waiting to be turned over to the sheriff. Glenn Redburn had repeated to Sam what he had already told Jean and Johnny.

When he had finished, Sam grinned at him. "Glad you come out with it, Glenn. It makes a lot of difference. I made a mistake in turning the cannery over to a man who knew only the paper side of it. That's important, but a hell of a long ways from being canning know-how. It was Johnny's job, but the string-bean cuss picked that particular time to ruffle my feathers. It you want to turn office man again, under Johnny, it's all right by me. I'd ruther have a son-in-law with his feet on the ground than with his head in the clouds."

Johnny Lind discovered suddenly that he was very tired, and he still faced the ordeal of having his leg probed and dressed when the doctor got there. He limped to the door, pulled it shut behind him, and strode across the porch. He heard the door open and shut behind him.

"Wait, Johnny," Jean said softly.

He stopped and turned. She came up and placed both hands on his arms, studying him in the light oozing from the window.

"It seems to me Sam Delfel's taking some mighty big decisions onto himself," she continued.

"Sam's got a good decider on him," Johnny said. "When he's feeling good, that is. I aim to take that cannery job."

"Johnny, Glenn isn't the only one who let an acorn grow up. I want to tell you something. I was black-balled from a girl's club in high-school. I heard roundabout that a girl said she couldn't stand the smell of fish. Just a catty little remark by somebody that didn't like me. I fought it, but it finally got me. So I tried to make me and Sam and everything else over, so nobody could ever say anything like that again.

"Wish Sam had shown spunk a long while ago. But I could always wrap him around my finger. So I took advantage of it. What he did today sort of makes me see the light. I think I'd like to live out here again, Johnny. I'd like to be one of the cannery outfit, if you'll all have me. And, darn your hide, if this doesn't prove I'm humbled, I don't know what will. Now it's your move, Johnny Lind."

He was scared to make it, though what she said could be carried on to a delightfully logical conclusion. "Well, maybe you can set Digger City back on its heels yet, girl. Glenn'll do all right."

"Hope he does," Jean said. "Hope he finds a nice girl to keep him at it. I've already told him so."

"No fooling?" Johnny was grinning suddenly. "Well, I got to admit I hatched out an acorn myself. Used to think you had the cutest pigtails on the White. They growed on me. Bedammed if I don't like you from head to toe and from one hand to the other. But there's got to be an understanding. I won't be shot at every time I come home."

"I've reconsidered that point," Jean said happily. "What good's a shot-up husband? A shot-up beau's slow enough."

THE END

LOST PATROL

Phil Carter, frontier shavetail, had enough hot-headed pride to drive his patrol straight into the waiting ring of deadly Sioux. . . . But where could he get the cold-blooded skill to lead them safely out?

By LEE E. WELLS

THREE DAYS out of Fort Lennox, the patrol found the burned cabin. Joe Bellows had profanely spoken of Injun sign for hours and, though it irked him, Lt. Phil Carter had used due caution. They had worked up Lost Creek,

Carter caught a glimpse of the heavy-bladed hunting knife the Sioux snaked from his belt.

Bellows somewhere ahead, two men out as a screen. Carter's impatience edged his voice.

"Can we depend on Bellows, sergeant?"

"About Indians, yes sir," Dorn replied. He was around forty, a veteran of the campaigns in Mexico and the Civil War, a stocky man with mild blue eyes and a rock-formed chin. "Joe tells his big lies, sir. But no man out here talks Sioux just for the fun of it."

Carter caught the implication in his sergeant's tone that the lieutenant was new, a tenderfoot, that his epaulets were still bright and untarnished. Lt. Carter's dark eyes swept the empty succession of low hummocks that gradually lifted westward to the far horizon. There was nothing but grass and sky, and the thick foliage that lined Lost Creek.

"I've seen no sign of Sioux," he snapped.

"Yes, sir," Dorn replied, voice flat and without intonation. Carter shifted restlessly. He was a tall young man, handsome in the dark blue uniform, polished boots and campaign hat—quite the most dashing officer yet to appear at Fort Lennox.

SUDDENLY a rider came out of the trees, a man in buckskins and slouch hat, his rifle resting across his saddle. He came on at a long lope and drew rein close to Carter.

"Injuns. You'll need a burial detail, lieutenant."

"Burial!"

"A-yep. Two men lost their ha'r and considerable hide. Ye'll see. I'd say it was some of Heavy Wolf's bucks."

Carter lifted the reins and moved on as Bellows fell in beside him. Joe Bellows was lean and rode his rangy bay in a strange, disjointed fashion. His buckskins were dark with grease and smoke and his coarse, black hair hung far down on his shoulders. He had a constant squint and his mouth was loose and irregular, the skin heavy textured as though the grime of countless unwashed years had been ground into it.

There was little that Carter liked about Fort Lennox, and all of his irritation and anger centered on Joe Bellows. He was a man who had scant respect for authority and truth, whose mocking laughter and sly grin bespoke his utter contempt for regulations and gold braid. It was absurd that Major Syms should place so much dependence on the man. Carter recalled the major's last bit of advice.

"Bellows knows the country, lieutenant. You'll be guided by him. This is a routine patrol, but your first. You will use your own judgment if you meet up with small bands of Sioux. They're restless and we've had word they're gathering for war. Heavy Wolf talks peace to the Commissioners, and a new treaty. So we can do no more than police the area.

"But if you catch a band red-handed, robbing and raiding, round 'em up and bring 'em in. But make sure it's a small band. Make sure you've got the goods on 'em. Otherwise, Heavy Wolf will have all the arguments on his side."

"You're saying, sir, that under certain circumstances I should run from a bunch of filthy Indians?"

"Exactly, and that's no disgrace. We've lost some damn' good men on the frontier because of hot-headed and ambitious officers. You're fortunate to have Joe Bellows, Carter."

"Thank you, sir."

Syms caught the slight undertone and looked sharply at the young officer, his rugged face darkening for a moment. Then he smiled and extended his hand.

"There's nothing personal in my precautions, Carter. Good luck, and Flora wishes you'd be careful. You should be back in time for the post dance."

"Yes sir," Carter smiled, his face lighting. So he had made a deep impression on

Flora Syms—the first good break at Lennox.

He came to with a start as Joe Bellows spoke. He found himself once again approaching Lost Creek.

"Maybe four-five of 'em," Joe said. "They caught the two boys sound asleep. You'll see."

They threaded through the cottonwoods to the bank of the creek, and Bellows turned sharp left. There was a path of sorts here that followed the windings of the creek, debouching suddenly onto a clearing.

CARTER first saw the squat cabin and the door that was invitingly open. Then he saw two still forms sprawled grotesquely before the building. When he rode closer, his stomach wanted to turn over.

The men had been scalped. Indian bullets had mercifully ended their lives before the mutilation began, but even so it made a man squeamish to look at the bodies. Carter swung wide and rode to the cabin, dismounted.

"Appoint a burial detail, sergeant."

Sgt. Dorn took charge as Carter, stooping a little, entered the cabin. There was a single long, low room, and the Indians had gone through it like a cyclone. The plank table was overturned, the bunks ripped, a flour sack had been gutted, the stove tipped over and the pipe knocked down. Supplies had been thrown everywhere.

Dorn and Joe Bellows came in and looked around. Carter removed his hat and wiped away the sweat that ringed his forehead. Joe spat elaborately into one corner and, for some reason, it seemed a desecration to Carter. He snapped his hat back on his head.

"How long ago did this happen?" he asked. Joe took his time, looked around, walked to the cabin door and peered outside. He turned at last.

"Maybe three hours, maybe four—not long, anyhow. I remember once about four years ago when I—"

"Four or five Indians, you say?" Carter broke in. Joe squinted at him.

"A-yep. Some of Heavy Wolf's boys getting in a little practice for the big fight they figure on later."

"They'll have their fight," Carter said harshly, "but before they plan on it. Sergeant, have the men ready to move out when the burials are completed."

"Yes, sir," Dorn answered, hesitated. "It don't seem right, sir, to put 'em away like a couple of dogs or horses. Just a short prayer'd make it better, somehow."

Carter looked surprised and then embarrassed. In the few weeks he had been at Lennox, Sergeant Abel Dorn had impressed him as a very tough and self-sufficient man, almost an impersonal automation. Carter tried to picture himself leading a service before the men of his patrol and he knew, very definitely, that he couldn't do it.

"We won't have time, sergeant, if we hope to catch up with those red killers. I'm sure we'll all have the thought even if we don't speak the words."

Joe Bellows moved to the door. "I'll skitter around and see which way they went," he said and disappeared. Dorn walked slowly to the door, half turned.

"It'd set well with the men, sir. They'd know then maybe some time when it happened to them—"

"Carry on, sergeant. We'll see."

Dorn saluted and went outside. Carter looked around the room once more and then left the cabin. On impulse he shut the door, first pulling the latch string inside. There were two mounds of earth, fresh turned, and the men looked questioningly at him. Carter came up to the graves and his glance traveled over the men. Dorn was right, but though a wordless prayer was in his heart, he could not bring himself to speak.

"Sergeant, have eight men get their

carbines and assemble here. These two died in action and they should receive honors accordingly. Could one of you men say a prayer?"

"I—I can, sir."

He was young, still a youth, and there was something in his face and eyes that spoke of the farms back East. Ed Rollins, Carter recalled, newly enlisted and sent out from Illinois. He nodded briefly and Rollins walked to a place between the graves, waited until four troopers formed on each side. He bowed his head.

He had a quiet and deep voice that sincerely spoke of life and hope beyond those mounds of earth. At the end of the prayer, Carter called attention and the parting volley rang out. It was a relief to hear the familiar snap of commands as Sergeant Dorn ordered the men back to their mounts.

Joe Bellows drifted in. "They headed north," he said, "and they rode fast. This is close enough to Lennox the Injuns expect patrols, so they ain't hanging around."

"We'll get them," Carter snapped. He swung into saddle and signalled forward with his arm. Joe Bellows rode ahead several yards, then gradually increased the distance between himself and the troop. Dorn came up quietly and took his place slightly behind Carter.

THEY left the trees behind them and once more faced the monotony of the rolling plains and hummocks. This was a world completely different to all Carter had known. Even the soldiers behind him departed from the norm of his knowledge. Regulations were no longer paramount, but adapted to the country and the foe until they wore a strange, new look. Carter didn't like it. Of an army family, he felt comfortable within the tight jacket of routine.

Bellows reined in and waited for the troop to catch up with him, a small but irritating habit he had. He should have returned and made his report, but there he waited, slouched in the saddle, one cheek bulged by a tobacco quid.

"They met four more Injuns," Joe said, "and they ain't running so fast as they was."

"Eight," Carter said and he looked off at the far distant swell of the earth. He now had a more serious problem, though he had no doubt that his patrol could easily handle eight Sioux. He caught Dorn covertly watching him. Carter squared his shoulders.

"Lead on, Bellows."

They settled to riding again. The steady rhythm eased Carter's mind and he thought of other things. Flora Syms and then—surprisingly—Private Rollins.

They had covered several miles and they approached another stream flowing southeast. The scout disappeared into the bushes and trees that lined the bank but soon reappeared again. As he came up, Carter thought he saw a look of sly triumph in the man's eyes.

"We're heading into something," he reported. "A big band came down from the north and our boys j'ined them. They held a powwow at the edge of the river and then headed north."

"How many?" Carter asked sharply.

"Must be twenty, I reckon. Too damn' many for us to jump."

"I'll be the judge of that, Bellows. From your stories, I should think twenty would be just the right number for you to handle."

Joe's jaw stopped working on the cud for a moment and then placidly continued. He grinned widely, his lips looking an ugly moist red through the stubble.

"Sure, now! But I've been out here a heap of years and can take care of myself."

Carter flushed and realized that he had been foolish to show his irritation. Joe Bellows had returned the dig and Carter

stood in a bad position. His ears were slightly red as he spoke stiffly to Dorn.

"We'll look at the sign Bellows has found."

They came to the river bank and, on order, the troopers dismounted and watered their horses. Carter bent over the tracks with Dorn and Bellows. The churned ground told him very little but it seemed to be an open book to the scout. His grimy finger pointed here and there.

"Some horses was shod and they're probably stolen down south somewhere. Others ain't. They stood and jawed awhile here, boasting how they took a couple of easy scalps. Then they watered and headed across the crick over that way."

"Twenty, you say?" Carter asked.

"Count it yourself," Bellows said in a lordly way that made Dorn look up quickly and just as swiftly down again. Carter straightened and looked across the river.

"I figure," Bellows went on, "that Heavy Wolf hisself ain't far off. There's too many tracks all leading to the same place. Yesterday, a big band went by about two miles back."

"How do you know?"

"I crossed their sign," Bellows said.

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Well, I feared I might a been accused of blowing again, lieutenant. Besides, we was trailing the four that burned the cabin and I've heard you always stick to orders and nothing else."

"I'll interpret regulations," Carter snapped. He tried to consider his position, but he was too aware of Bellows' silent mockery to think very clearly.

"Twenty Sioux is a lot of Indians," Dorn said musingly to nobody at all, "and if Heavy Wolf's close around, the major would certainly like to know about it."

"Twenty's a heap for a man to cut his teeth on," the scout agreed. "Four's more like it. I'd sure head for the Fort and tell the major his old Injun friend is about to pay him a visit."

CARTER'S jaw tightened. He felt that Bellows was waiting for him to order a quick return to the fort and that he would be silently laughing at him. In time, the old liar would build this up to a disorderly retreat, saved only by Bellows' heroic action and incredible fighting. Damned if Phil Carter's name would be brought into a story like that!

"We don't know that Heavy Wolf is in the neighborhood, sergeant," Carter said slowly. "We'd better make sure of it. We'll follow on this trail. If we run on the main camp, we'll withdraw quietly and report to the major. If we meet up with the marauders first, we'll capture them and take them in."

"Heavy Wolf's close," Joe Bellows said and suddenly all the banter was gone from his voice. "Hell, man! You don't want to run the risk—"

"I'm in command," Carter said brusquely. "We ride immediately, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"Two men out as flankers. One behind. Bellows will give us a screen ahead."

"Yes, sir."

Dorn saluted and walked away. Carter drank, washed the sweat from his face and hands, and felt better. The scout had mounted and he silently watched Carter, his jaw moving slowly. At last he spat to one side and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"It ain't no good for any man to get riled in this country, lieutenant. He don't think straight and first thing ye know his scalp's hanging from a Sioux lodgepole. I reckon I blow considerable but mostly I don't mean nothing by it—"

"I'm only interested in your scouting ability," Carter cut in. "We're leaving immediately."

"A-yep," Bellows straightened and squinted across the river. He spat again and his drawl was edged. "But there ain't no telling when you're coming back."

He moved out into the shallow stream, the horse kicking a silver spray that glinted in the sunlight. Carter mounted, saw that the troop was ready and they followed him across the river. The moment they reached the far bank, the flankers moved out to position and Dorn came to his accustomed post.

Carter turned in the saddle and looked over the men. They were a competent lot, except Rollins. He stood out from the rest, like a sparrow in a flock of hawks. New and raw, Carter thought. Then he pulled himself up short.

Only the discipline and training of West Point set him apart from Rollins. They were both untried in this Indian country, they both had to meet their first test of rifle fire and of swift flashing attack. In that moment Carter felt drawn to Rollins as though an almost tangible bond existed between them. Sensing this, a bit of his stiff anger left him.

He'd be smart to turn back. Bellows should know if Heavy Wolf was close around and Major Syms must be warned. But Carter had committed himself and for awhile at least, he had to go forward to save his own face. They'd camp tonight and in the morning turn toward Lennox, the token pursuit made so that there could be no thought of fear or over-caution.

"Joe's a funny'n sir," Dorn said abruptly. "He don't look like much but that's 'cause he's almost Injun himself. I've seen his kind before down in Sonora, Texas. They can smell Injun ten miles off, ye'd swear."

"Very interesting, sergeant," Carter said noncommittally. Dorn nodded, choosing to ignore the withdrawal in the officer's voice.

"Men like him don't shine much to regulations and orders, but we can't get along without 'em on the Plains. He hooraws a newcomer like we haze a recruit in the barracks. Rollins got his two weeks back. Took it standing straight up, he did, and all the men like him. He'll make a soldier."

"What are you trying to say, sergeant?"

"Nothing, sir," Dorn spoke hastily, but his square face had reddened. "I thought ye'd like to know about the scout."

"I think I know him," Carter said and Dorn withdrew into his own thoughts. But Carter knew what Dorn had tried to say. The lieutenant was new, raw and wet behind the ears despite the bar on his shoulder and his shiny new commission. He, too, must be tested and Bellows had already started the process. Unspoken was the implication that Carter was not doing so well.

Damn it! A man made his own decisions! An officer was in command, trained for the post, found officially adequate for the job by the government. Why, then, should ordinary troopers or a grimy army scout test him further? Carter glanced at the sun that had started toward the western horizon.

BELLOWS came riding back. "More come in. Women and the papoose this time. We're catching up."

"How many?" Carter asked evenly.

"It's a big party now," Bellows answered, "and they're moving slow. A good hundred, I'd say. If I was handling this party, I'd head fast toward Lennox."

"You're not. I have only your word for it that the tribes are gathering. I prefer something more substantial."

"By God! I ain't lying!"

"Watch your talk, Bellows. I haven't said you were. We'll continue until dark."

Dorn nervously fingered the reins and shifted around in his saddle. Finally he leaned forward. "Begging the lieutenant's pardon, but women and papoose is a sure sign this ain't a war party. But if we get too close—"

"Sergeant," Carter asked tightly, "are you telling me what to do?"

Dorn choked and his blue eyes blazed. He straightened in the saddle and his words came hard as if they choked him. "No, sir. But I thought you'd like to know Indian ways. I'm not—arguing about orders, sir."

"Very well, sergeant."

Carter touched his spurs and moved forward. Bellows looked at the troop, eyes briefly sweeping over each man. He shook his head then moved out ahead at a gallop as though the burst of speed relieved the worry piling up within him.

The sun moved on to the west and within an hour it would dip beyond the rim of the world. The heat increased, a final torture before night would come. Bellows came back, placing his horse directly before Carter so that the officer was forced to halt.

"No sight of the Sioux yet," Bellows said. "But we've been spotted sure as a beaver swims."

Carter looked beyond Bellows at the empty world of swales and grass. Not far away another line of foliage marked one of the numerous streams. He could see nothing that indicated Indians, or any other living thing. His eyes lifted to the sun.

He felt Dorn and Bellows watching him, waiting and judging. He was certain that both men expected him to turn back. He felt that he should, but another part of him urged him forward. Less than an hour and he could then turn back without having capitulated to a dirty scout and the sergeant.

For a moment he wrestled with his problem. He tried to forget the personal angles, but they kept intruding. In a small post like Lennox, the whisper of the barracks soon reached the officers' quarters. What would be said of him if Dorn and Bellows boasted of how they had influenced him? Dorn, perhaps, would not say much, but Joe Bellows would blow the whole thing out of proportion. Carter glanced again at the sun. Just a short way more.

"How do you know we're spotted?" he asked abruptly.

"Reading sign. All of a sudden the squaws lit out lickety-split. Some of the warriors dropped back to cover 'em."

"Running from us!"

"Ye might say that," Joe answered. "But they might be fixing a trap somewhere ahead."

Just a few minutes longer, Carter thought. They're running and we won't be able to catch up with them before dark. His eyes dropped to the distant foliage, swept the horizon again. No chance of a trap that he could see.

"We'll ride on to that stream," he said at last, "and camp."

"Ye push your luck," Joe said sharply and wheeled away before Carter could reply. Carter lifted his hand and the patrol moved forward. The men had heard the exchange and they were uneasy, alert.

The trees and bushes loomed closer and Bellows had long since plunged into them. He came out, signalled with his hat and wheeled back into their cover again. Carter felt himself breathing more easily. He had followed the trail this far and would be able to give Major Syms almost definite news as to Heavy Wolf's probable location, He had upheld his own authority on this first patrol and yet he had used due caution and his men were not endangered. In fact, he could be credited with a certain amount of boldness in pressing as far as he had.

They entered the trees and came out on the stream, wider than the rest. Before him was a wide beach, perfect for camping. Carter signalled a halt.

Bellows dismounted. He stared across the river and then squinted to the west, bright now with the sun below the horizon.

"I reckon they've gone on," he said with a note of relief in his voice. "Heavy

Wolf's main band can't be far and I sure don't like so many Injuns around me all at once."

Carter smiled tightly and then chuckled aloud, friendly now that he had apparently proved his point. "You can still make a good story of it, Bellows."

"So can Heavy Wolf if'n he's as sharp as I figure him."

CARTER laughed again and dismissed the warning with a slight wave of his hand. The patrol settled to the camp and fires gleamed as darkness crept along the river and over the small beach.

With the sentries out, a new feeling of security came over the men. Carter stretched out on the soft sand, glad to relax aching muscles. The major would be pleased and this time tomorrow night Carter would call on Flora, perhaps talk a little about the patrol.

"Orders, sir?" Dorn asked and Carter jerked around.

"No, sergeant. Sit down." Dorn looked surprised at Carter's friendly tone, but he hunkered down, waiting. "We return to the post in the morning with a much better report about the Indians."

"Joe is restless," Dorn said. Carter smiled but there was a touch of hardness in his eyes.

"Are you, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, I am. You never can tell about Indians, sir, and Sioux especially. I've fought 'em for years and I still won't guess what Heavy Wolf will do about us so close to him."

"You're saying, sergeant, I'm new and I don't know what I'm doing."

Dorn didn't grow angry but he considered the statement at some length. then he met Carter's direct look.

"I obey orders, sir, and so will the men. If you give the word, we'll go with you to Heavy Wolf himself." Carter visibly relaxed.

"A good soldier, sergeant."

"Yes, sir, but that doesn't say what I personally think. No man can rightly complain if he sees a fight will get him somewhere, or has some meaning. But he don't like throwing himself away."

Carter's face went red, then white and finally regained its normal color. Dorn had quietly told Carter what he thought and he had spoken only at the officer's insistence. Carter turned stiffly.

"We know where Heavy Wolf is—at least what area."

"We could have known that this afternoon, sir. Joe Bellows could have trailed this bunch alone clean to Heavy Wolf's camp if you'd turned him loose. We could have turned back to the post and Joe's report would have confirmed ours As it is, we're all up here now."

"That will be all, sergeant," Carter said. Dorn arose, saluted and walked away to the men.

Carter sat staring into the fire. Anger raged in him but gradually it subsided and he began to think clearly again. He realized Dorn had been right, and then he saw that he had made an even worse mistake than following a trail too far.

He had antagonized Dorn, and a sergeant could make or break a new officer. Carter rubbed his hand along his jaw, feeling far less sure of himself. Bellows had left camp by the time Carter rolled into his blanket, and sleep was a long time coming.

"Throwing himself away," kept repeating itself and Carter suddenly remembered how Rollins had looked saying a prayer over two fresh mounds of earth. A recruit, from Illinois, hardly a man yet. Would he be thrown away?

Carter sat up and stared into the last faint sparks of the embers. He sensed rather than saw the sleeping men close by and he heard the muffled thud of a hoof as a horse moved on the picket line.

Carter examined the events of the day and found nothing to his credit. He had

flaunted his bar, and acted the proud young fool. He learned in this dark hour that a golden bar was in itself nothing and of no value unless there was understanding and maturity behind the symbol. He had acted like a kid with a tin badge.

He had risked the patrol. He had actually gone beyond his orders, although there was a shadow of an excuse on his side. That was not enough, however. Carter threw back the blanket and arose.

"SERGEANT!" he called.

A shadow stirred, moved and in a moment Dorn's bulk loomed close. The man started to throw wood on the fire, but Carter stopped him.

"No light, sergeant. Has Bellows returned?"

"No, sir."

"Would you say he's run into trouble?"

Dorn thought that over. "I might, sir. He should have been back by now."

Carter's voice dropped. "You're a better officer than I am, sergeant. Can you see my epaulet?"

"No, sir," Dorn said, puzzled. Carter chuckled wryly.

"And I can't see your stripes. That makes us equal for the moment and unofficial, I'd say. I hope you agree."

"Well—yes, sir."

"Then, unofficially, Abel Dorn, you have my apologies. I've acted like a fool—to you and Joe Bellows. Your hand on it?"

"Every man has to learn, sir. I was pretty bad myself when I first saw Mexico. Ye have no need to apologize. We'll make it through all right."

"I'm going to be sure. We're breaking camp immediately, sergeant. Call in the sentries and be ready to ride in ten minutes. No noise, in case our Indian friends might be watching. Bellows would be back before this if he could make it."

"Yes, sir."

Dorn faded away and Carter buckled on saber and gun belt. A man led up his horse and he could hear the patrol stirring. In a few moments Dorn returned.

"We're ready, sir."

Carter mounted, passed the order for the men to close up. The night was pitch dark and it would be easy to stray if the intervals grew too large. He quietly ordered them forward and, leading the way, he moved into the thick shadow of the trees. He could hear only the creak of leather, an occasional clink of a saber.

They had to move slowly though Carter felt an urge to set the spurs and race for the free and open plain beyond the river. But he held himself in. A night bird called sleepily just ahead of him but Carter barely noticed the sound. Dorn pressed in close as the cry was repeated to the left and right.

"Sioux, lieutenant. Wasn't no chance of Joe reaching us. We're surrounded. They'd have jumped us first crack o' dawn. It's their way."

"Sioux!"

"Them night birds, sir. That's sentries telling their friends we're pulling out."

"Sabers and pistols, sergeant. We'll give 'em no chance to stop us."

The night bird called again, just ahead and a little to the left. With a twist of his reins, Carter turned his horse directly toward the sound. It seemed that the shadows lessened somewhat and that they were close to the open country. Carter quietly drew his pistol. His voice was hardly raised but carried clearly to every man of the patrol.

"Keep close up. Don't scatter. If you do get separated, strike directly for Fort Lennox. Ready? Charge!"

He sank the spurs and the patrol swept forward into the night, bearing down on a foe it could not see. For a few yards they raced ahead without opposition and then rifles crashed. Carter heard the waspish sound of the bullets overhead, the savage, angry yell of the Indians. They had

ridden straight into a very strong trap.

On he raced. The dim light grew stronger. Rushing shadows bore down on him and a carbine thundered close. Carter lifted his pistol, saw the bulk of a horse and savage rider. He squeezed the trigger, half turned and fired hastily at another Indian who rode in from the left.

He missed this one and then the man was on him. Carter glimpsed the Indian's carbine coming up. The man was so close that Carter's arm knocked the carbine aside. His mount struck the Indian pony and it went down, thrashing. The shock caused Carter to lose a stirrup. He swayed wildly in the saddle a moment, then recovered.

HE COULD hear yells far to the left and right. Pistols cracked around him but ahead the way was clear. Suddenly he was free of the trees and he could see the bright stars overhead. He looked back over his shoulder and, so far as he could see, the patrol had broken through intact. Dorn came up close and Carter caught the flash of the man's grin.

"We made it, sir. None too soon."

"Keep riding," Carter ordered. "They'll come after us."

"Not for long."

Dorn dropped back to keep the men bunched up. Carter checked his headlong speed and settled into a ground-eating gallop. Dorn came up again.

"Take over, sergeant," Carter ordered and veered to one side. He turned and reined in. He raised up in his stirrups and, as the men thundered by, looked toward the trees along the river. He saw riders race out and Carter wheeled, spurred after his men.

He remained at the rear of the column. He could hear faint, yipping yells that drew closer for a time. Then they lessened and Carter knew that only a few of the Indians pursued them. He spurred ahead to Dorn's side.

At his order the twelve men turned, drew rein and waited. Just a few moments passed and then they saw the Indian a small bunch of the boldest, perhaps twenty. Carter's shout spurred the patrol forward and they struck the Sioux like a bolt of lightning.

The surprised Indians scattered but not before half a dozen saddles had been emptied. Carter led the attack and he raced toward a tall Indian who seemed to be the leader. The man lifted a carbine and hastily fired, but the bullet went wide.

Then Carter was on him. He avoided a savage swing of the man's gun, and his own saber cut was parried. Both horses were side by side for an instant and the Indian dropped his carbine, grappled Carter to hold him close and pull him from the saddle. Carter caught a glimpse of the heavy-bladed hunting knife the Indian snaked from a sheath at his belt.

It was too close work for the cut and slash of the saber, but Carter used a hard backhand blow that brought the heavy pommel across the man's temple. The Sioux collapsed, tumbled from the saddle. Carter wheeled his horse, but the Indians were gone.

The patrol chased them only a short way and then circled back. Carter returned his saber and wiped the sweat from his eyes as Dorn came riding up, grinning.

"They won't be back, sir, leastways without all their friends."

"We won't be around, sergeant. See if any of these Indians are alive."

Dorn dismounted and started checking the sprawled bodies. He came to the Sioux that Carter had downed, struck a light and gasped in surprise. Carter turned.

"This is Heavy Wolf himself, sir," Dorn exclaimed. "You've knocked him out."

"Heavy Wolf!" Carter whistled. "We'll have the whole tribe on our heels

after him. Tie him up across a pack horse. Waste no time, sergeant. Major Syms will want to see that gentleman."

The patrol rode fast toward Lennox, Carter giving them only short rest periods. Before dawn Heavy Wolf recovered consciousness and was permitted to ride upright, his feet and arms bound.

Just at sundown the patrol rode into Lennox, across the parade ground to headquarters. Carter turned the patrol over to Dorn, then he and Rollins led Heavy Wolf into the building. As Carter started up the steps, a captain came out. He stared at Carter.

"You're surrounded!" he blurted. "Joe Bellows just come in."

"Not this time, sir," Carter smiled.

The officer wheeled and accompanied him to Major Syms' office. Joe Bellows stood just inside the door, a bloody bandage on his head. He stared at Carter and the Indian, who stood tall and forbidding.

"Heavy Wolf!" Bellows choked. "I scouted around and run into an ambush. Just luck I got away and then I saw ye was surrounded by the Sioux waiting for dawn to come. How'd ye get out?"

"Rode out," Carter replied, "before Heavy Wolf was ready for me."

HE MADE his report and turned Heavy Wolf over to Major Syms. There was now every chance that, with the capture of the chieftain, the Indian trouble would pass—at least temporarily. Carter reported three men slightly wounded. At last Major Syms rose and extended his hand.

"Well done, lieutenant. I congratulate you on your first command." He hesitated and his eyes twinkled. "I'm sure a certain young lady would be pleased to see you this evening if you're not too exhausted from your duties."

"I'm not, sir."

Carter left the building and walked across the parade ground to the stables. The men were taking care of the horses and Dorn called them to attention.

"At ease." Carter said and looked them over. He saw a new respect in their eyes, an unspoken friendliness. "The major has extended his compliments to the patrol. You've done a good job and I'm proud to be one of you. That's all, sergeant, except I'd like a word with you."

Carter led the way outside the stable just as Bellows came up, a clean bandage on his head. The young officer looked from one to the other.

"You were the leaders of the patrol."

"It was you," Bellows shook his head. "what slipped through the Injuns."

"No," Carter denied, "it was Joe Bellows and Sergeant Abel Dorn who taught a raw recruit to be an officer—and it took some doing. I'll be glad to campaign with you both."

Bellows rubbed his palm along his buckskin. He chuckled.

"Sure, now! So will I! Ye'll give me fine stories to dress up and tell—how I fought with Lt. Carter ag'n' the Sioux."

IT'S RED CROSS TIME

"We shake hands, and off comes m' left flipper in Badger Bill's grip. He about dies on his feet."

Loaded for Bear

By GEORGE C. APPELL

"Youngster, many's the man who'd give his right arm for fame and fortoon. But not me, son—I ain't that kind. So I gave m' left. . . . "

THE DISTANT whoop of the railroad whistle was the only sound to spear the silence of sunset, and the lone guide at the hunting camp stretched and yawned and stretched again, glad to be alone at last. The sportsmen from the East were gone now, and he could be alone until next season.

And then he heard the footfall of a pony and turned and saw the pinto being led toward him by a shuffle-stepped old man with a curly gray beard. "Evenin'," the stranger said.

The guide frowned slightly. "Evenin'. An' what brings the likes o' you here all by the lonesome?"

The old stranger dropped the reins and eyed appreciatively a crock of whisky that stood near the racks of bearskins. "Which I'm jes' sashayin' 'twixt Kiowa an' Willow Gulch, an' the smell o' whiskey drew Waldo, here, an' me right to your camp."

"The only thing that sustains life, except f'r the blood, which must be kept warm at all times." They drank. "You

say you come from Kiowa, did you, now?"

"No, nor do I come from Willow Gulch. I sort of stays in buh-tween 'em, not bein' able to ride far, 'cause of m'missin' hooker. . . . Whatfor do these yere Eastern sharps go after—field mice?"

"Hell, no, they don't. Three did they bag, due largely, o' course, to my directions an' guidance." The host poured once more. "You ever shot bear, dad, or did you lose that hooker afore you could aim?"

"Youngster, I shot a herd o' things in my time, greasers not included, but one thing I'll never no more shoot is b'ar. Nossir, one o' them fellas done saved m'life an' heaped fame an' fortoon on m'head, an' I would never no more plug no b'ar." He finished his drink and accepted another. "'Course, it cost me m'hand, but it brought me the aforementioned fame an' fortoon, which next to likker is every man's blood."

THE GUIDE stoked up the fire as twilight deepened; the light had faded away from the setting sun, and now only a last whelm of daybright hung in the sky. The two were alone on the land, and the guide's last compunction to courtesy vanished with the afternoon. "If I may pry further, dad, how did that left flipper get unjoined from you?"

The old man hitched nearer to the stove-glow, balancing his drink in the palm of his wiry right hand. "Wal-l . . . it's like I say, a b'ar done it, though the result was wuth the swop. Seems thet some years ago, afore the West become man's private pree-serve an' belonged to b'ar an' the birds, I was wranglin' north o' here, at a place then called Sweet Creek, which as everyone knows is but four-five miles from Rocky Holler.

"It comes up Christmas thet year, an' what with one thing an anuther, the boys got to tootin' an' all, an' some gent suggests we pay a call to Rocky Holler, though sober an' without Christmas, most've us jus' as soon plug 'em all over thataway.

"So over we goes through the snow, an' around the canyon which separates the two risin' mount-tains, an' the Rocky Holler gang puts out f'r us fine. We starts to depart, but no, them Rocky Holler riders have got to ees-cort us back to Sweet Creek, which they does in fine order.

"Then we had some likker at our camp, and by the time the Rocky Holler gents is leavin', nothin' must do but we ees-corts them home as a courtesy. They bruk out the likker an' we had a round've rounds, an' started f'r home in Sweet Creek, only to find them per-lit gents ees-cortin' us back.

"Wel-l, seems like we made several trips thet night, an' come daylight, I was lyin' halfway to hell in a snowbank, with nothin' around' me but white stuff an' nothin' above me but the high tunnel I'd made by m'tumble. I heerd voices, an' pretty soon I hollered back, an' they hollered down, and we duly established contact.

"'Whatfor you pree-servin' yourself for?' demands one gent. 'Come on up here, 'cause shore'n hell, we can't get no line down.'

"I couldn't see 'em, an' they couldn't see me, an' then, Merry Christmas, I knew what had occurred. I'd got tossed off m'pony over the rim o' thet canyon into the snow thet was fillin' it, an' I'd sunk in deep at a crazy angle, and' they couldn't drop a rope in, an' the snow was that ungrabby, I couldn't climb out.

"So I hollers, 'Toss in some likker an' airtights, an' I'll be out come spring.' Wal-l, they tried a few passes, an' missed, but finally in comes a bottle, then some airtights, which is canned stuff, an' then another bottle, an' I was snug as a roach behind a bar.

"They hollered: 'We thought Badger

Bill done got you, but long's yo're all right, we'll keep feedin' yuh till spring.'

"I hollers up, 'I'll be at the bottom of the canyon, come spring, so meet me thar.'

" 'Be yuh comfortable?' they want to know.

" 'Safe from Badger Bill, at least,' I answers 'em, this Badger Bill bein' a fast hand with a sixgun, an' bein' requested and' required throughout all states an' territories, which same wish to hand him over to Judge Lynch. So the Sweet Creek crowd kept a-droppin' grub an' likker to me, an' the snow was warm when packed close, an' I could fell my-self sinkin' slow-like, and' thataway kept time with the calendar.

"Once I had me a fright, o' sorts, when the thaw begun makin' the canyon creek below the snow rise up somewhat, an' I commenced to rise with it, an' I held no wish to be pushed up out've thet hole, as it was a long walk through the drifts to Sweet Creek, whereas if'n I plumped out the bottom, the boys'd all be a-waitin' f'r me.

"But the thaw played out, an' I kept gettin' lower an' lower, an' I marked January off on the snow-wall, an' February—which was partee-cular cold, as only twent-two quarts come down 'stead've the customary thirty—an' finally it was March.

"One afternoon when I was dozin', I heered a whufflin' an' gruntin', an' I woke up an' knew a b'ar was holin' up in the side o' thet canyon, an' that I was passin' him on my slow way down. If he could just' stay in thar a week an' let me down easy, it'd be safe, but if'n he come pokin' through the snow, it'd be somethin' else again.

"So I snored off somewhat, an' next thing I knew, I woke up yellin' hard, 'cause thet ol' b'ar, he'd snooted through the calendar markin's on the snow an' plumb snapped off m'left hand for breakfast.

"I HAD little to do but stick the stump into the ice an' hold her thar, which I performed, an' toward the end o' March, I plop through into the creek, an' the water shoves me down an' cl'ar o' the snow, an' thar's the camp the boy's've been maintainin' f'r me.

" 'Wal, wal,' greet the boys, 'Merry Christmas again, an' what happened to your lunch-hook thar?'

"I tol' 'em what happened, an' they 'llowed that while thet was bad, shore, badder still was the news o' Badger Bill. 'Badger Bill,' they said as we rode back to Sweet Creek, 'is slammin' his sixguns mighty pre-miscus 'round yere, an' every able-bodied gent's part o' a posse to bring him in. Be you able-bodied without that flipper?'

"To which I replied, 'I shore am, it bein' m'left an' not m'shootin' hand.'

"So we contree-boots as few gents as possible to the spring roundup, an' the rest of us rides into the hills a-lookin' f'r this Badger Bill sharp, which has a reward from ever state an' territory.

"Wal-l, it soon becomes ay-pparent thet with one flipper, a gent can't chase through the mountains with ease, so I has to return to the roundup, whar I help with the brandin' an' sech, an' take a turn at flapjacks an' whatnot, an' make m'self as useful as a one-handed gent can be.

"Then one day ol' Pig Belly Pringle, the cook, he says f'r me to sniff 'round them foothills yonder an' try to supply-ment the larder with whatever may be in them thar foothills, a-comin' out to feed after the winter. So I ride off the pra'rie an' point f'r the timber, all alone an' hopin' to run across somethin' that'll taste different from hardtack an' bacon.

"Mebbe two, three day later, havin' pitched camp, I cut the tracks of the biggest b'ar in the West. Them tracks were bigger'n a Stetson's rim an' must've been six inches deep, so heavy was thet b'ar. I follered him close an' cautious, and he

led me a-circlin', like they'll do when they're feedin' up, an' I done seed other game but never did shoot, so scared was I of frightenin' off thet b'ar.

"Then I cut other tracks, an' they was pony tracks, an' I asked m'self what was pony tracks a-doin' in them foothills? An' the answer come right away: Badger Bill, shore enough.

"So now I was chasin' b'ar, while Badger Bill was mos' likely chasin' me, an' around an' around we went through them foothills, each with his smeller to the trail, an' a-watchin' close ahead an' behind. It wasn't but a day later thet I seen m'bear, an' he was bigger'n two Stetsons in the paws and higher't ten hands to the shoulders.

"Wal-l, I snaked up on him an' got right close to the ledge where he was a-viewin' of the day, an' drawed a steady bead just' behind his left shoulder, an' I tuk a breath an' was jus' about to whamgo, when all of a quick, another shot cracks forth an' m'b'ar jumps off thet ledge an' disappears in the timber down below.

"Badge Bill must've stole m'b'ar right from under m'sights, but I was deetermined not to lose that skin now, so I skittered down into the timber and come on thet b'ar whar he lay.

"I had to be fast, f'r Badger Bill mos' likely was comin' down too, an' I had no wish to meet up with thet sharp, me havin' but one hand an' all. So I ripped into thet b'ar with m'Bowie an' peeled off the biggest skin you ever did see.

"An' then I started cuttin' out hunks o' meat to freight back to Pig Belly Pringle, as I had to show somethin' f'r all thet time gone, an' thar it was, m'left hand, right whar he'd swallowed it to his insides. I cleaned it off, an' it looked pretty natural, all right, though on the hungry side, o' course, an' I was admirin' of it when I heerd a breakin' o' the bushes, an' into sight comes this here Badger Bill.

" 'Stay whar y'are!' he orders from a distance. An' hardly possessin' a alternative, I remained right thar. As he come closer through the timber, I re-did what that b'ar undid—I fastened m'hand back onto the stump with some tendon from the carcass, jus' to make a small joke f'r Badger Bill.

"HE BUSTS out've the bushes with a Winchester on his hip an' says: 'Thet's my b'ar, an' I aim to have it!'

" 'Go right ahead, Badger Bill, take it an' it's your'n."

" 'How come you know me?'

" 'Everyone knows you, Badger Bill. Take y'r b'ar.'

" 'An' does everyone know I got me an accomplice?'

" 'Thet I wouldn't know,' I answer true. 'But shake hands anyway, Badger Bill, to show there's no feelin's.'

"So I havin' m' Bowie in m'right hand, an' Badger Bill havin' his Winchester in his right, we shakes hands with our lefts, all fa'r 'n' sq'ar, an' off comes m'left hand in Badger Bill's grip, an' he looks once an' faints plumb away.

"I'm a-retrievin' o' thet Winchester an' tyin' him up somewhat with tendon when thet accomplice comes out've the bushes an' hollers, 'Don't plug me too! I'll confess everythin' we ever done, beginnin' with the Clark City bank job!'

"Wal-l, I c'llected o' thet reward, an' fame an' for-toon come m'way, but never since have I drilled a b'ar, nor do I ever eentend to. Mebbe them Eastern sharps o' yores possess a load o' b'ar, but they never had a b'ar pack a load f'r 'em as val-yooble as the one thet b'ar packed f'r me.

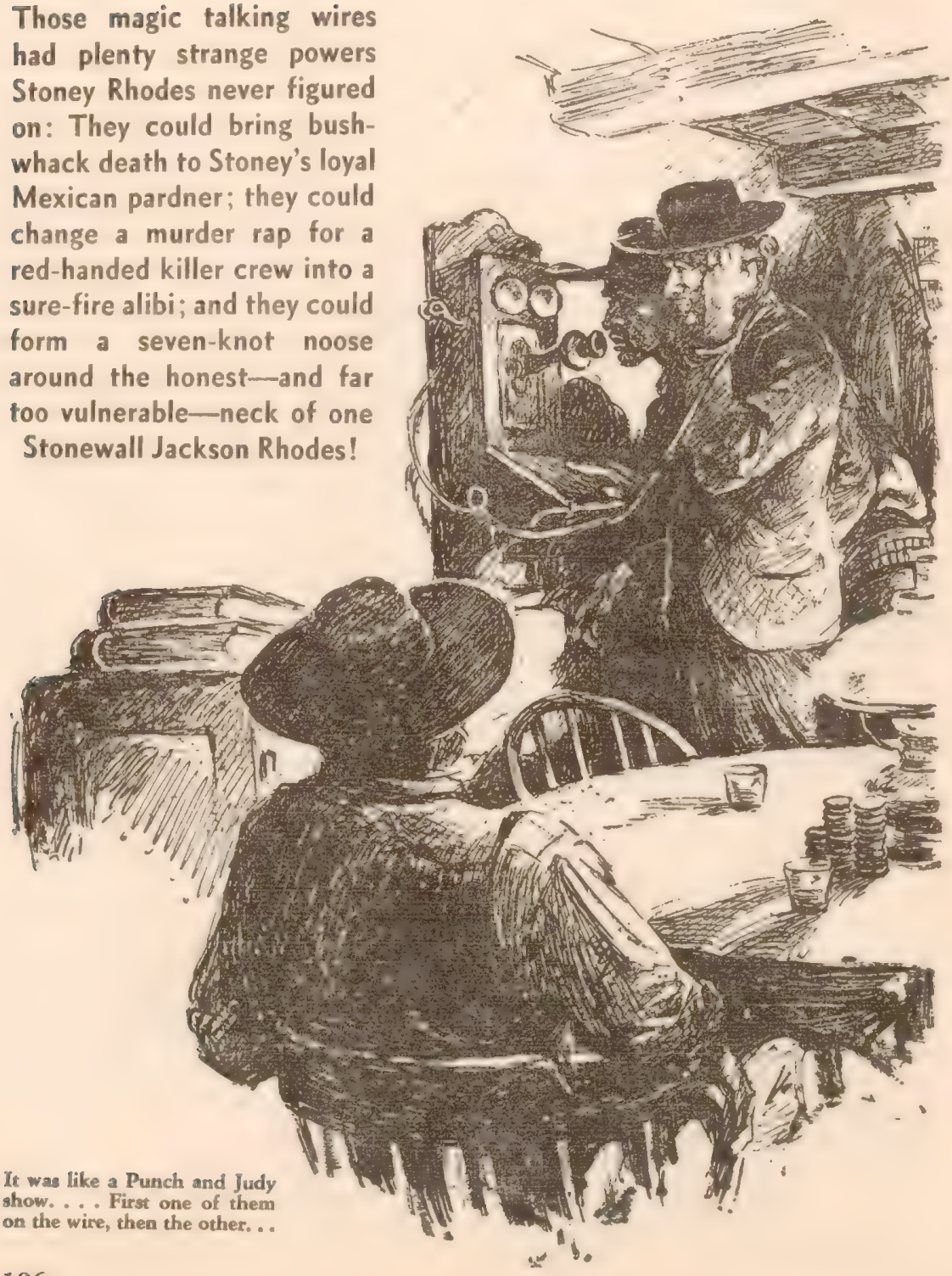
"An' thanks, I'll swaller one more afore I snaffle Waldo an' wander along toward Kiowa.

"Or was I headin' f'r Willow Gulch?"

• • THE TALKING

By BENNETT FOSTER

Those magic talking wires had plenty strange powers Stoney Rhodes never figured on: They could bring bushwhack death to Stoney's loyal Mexican pardner; they could change a murder rap for a red-handed killer crew into a sure-fire alibi; and they could form a seven-knot noose around the honest—and far too vulnerable—neck of one Stonewall Jackson Rhodes!



It was like a Punch and Judy show. . . . First one of them on the wire, then the other. . .

WIRES SAY "DIE!"

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Your Wake!

STONEWALL JACKSON RHODES—could he be other than Stoney Rhodes to his friends?—traveled peacefully into the land of his nativity. He led four horses—the lightest of them weighing a full thousand pounds. Each horse showed saddle marks and cinch chafes; and two had small white spots where hair was scalded. Roan, bay and sorrel were the colors, and each was decorated with several brands. Each was outlaw in his own right.

Soft August afternoon settled peacefully. To the west the Sink holes stretched away, tumbled sandstone under the lowering sun. South the flats rolled. Eastward ran the Pecos, a narrow ribbon through the land. Atop the hill, north of Santa Inez, Stonewall Jackson halted and surveyed his birthplace.

"Ain't changed much," he drawled, and Brown Jug cocked a polite ear. "Not near as much as I have." He

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grinned delightedly, lips curving under brown mustache.

Stonewall Jackson was right. In ten years Santa Inez had not changed as much as he. In ten years Stoney Rhodes had shot up from gangling thirteen to full-grown twenty-three, filled through shoulders and chest, added whiskers to his adolescence, wrinkles, too. In ten years Stoney Rhodes had become a man while Santa Inez had slept.

Slept? Well, not entirely. The railroad tracks still curved in from the north and disappeared southward. The ugly sandstone buildings still stalked the streets. But there were new warehouses along the tracks, and there was a new schoolhouse; new dwellings, too. From the northeast a single wire dipped in tight catenary curves between tall poles.

"Well, now," said Stoney Rhodes. "A telephone line. What do you think of that?"

Brown Jug thought little of it. Below, where the Pecos River threaded, there were green fields and small adobe houses, tiny native farms irrigated from the river. At one of those Stoney Rhodes would leave his outlaws, but not Brown Jug. Jug was bound for better things, grain in the livery barn, for instance.

"Eusabio Baca's place," Stoney said to himself. "Wonder if he will remember." The road branched to the river and he took the left-hand turn.

Eusabio Baca's house was small and squat. Eusabio Baca had a pole corral. Eusabio Baca's alfalfa stack was high and round, and Eusabio Baca was standing at the fence, talking to a horseback man. Once, long ago, Eusabio had ridden with the best. Once Eusabio had carried arms, as befitted a *caballero;* but a Comanche knife had scarred his chest and cut the tendons of a knee. Now Eusabio dragged his leg and could not raise his left arm more than shoulder arm.

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes halted at a polite distance and fragments of talk drifted to him, for the horseback man did not keep his voice lowered. Stoney Rhodes recognized the rider. He had battled with Quinn Spikesman through sixth and seventh grades.

"You owe that bill an' you'll pay it!" Spikesman said. "Four dollars."

Eusabio's low-voiced answer was lost to Stoney.

He moved Brown Jug ahead. Spikesman was still a bully. *"Buenos diäs,"* Stoney greeted, and nodded to Eusabio. "I wonder if I could get pasture for four horses here? I'd pay a dollar a head a week." He grinned disarmingly.

Eusabio Baca and Quinn Spikesman faced him and there was recognition in the eyes of neither. Stoney swung down and held Jug's reins. Money clinked suggestively in his pocket.

Spikesman said, "There's a feed yard an' livery barn in town."

Eusabio said, *"Seguramente, señor,* I have hay and a corral and a little pasture."

"We'll make a deal," Stoney announced, and transferring four silver dollars, led his horses toward the gate. When he reached it Spikesman was riding off while Eusabio came hurrying along the fence to lower the wire and let the horses in.

The corral was strong enough but Stoney doubted the integrity of the fence and said as much. Four horses were turned into the pen and hay was thrown to them. In the adobe house, where plainly no woman lived, Stoney and Eusabio drank a glass of wine. Thereafter Stonewall Jackson Rhodes mounted Brown Jug and went on to town. Eusabio had promised to repair the fence and any horses that were brought to him would be pastured.

In Santa Inez, with dusk beginning to close in, Stoney Rhodes traversed the street to Delehante's livery barn and wagon yard. Now, overhead, here and there, he saw stretched wire again. When

he dismounted at the barn, Harry Delehante came out.

Stoney was a stranger to Harry, too. Save for association, Harry was a stranger to him although they had been seated side by side in the eighth grade and performed devilment together. Unsaddled, Jug rolled in the corral, was fed in a stall, and Stoney Rhodes went to the office where a wash-basin, towel and soap were available. On the wall was a telephone resplendent in golden oak.

ABOVE the telephone, framed in black, was a photograph, a little cluster of youngsters, self-conscious in their Sunday best. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes grinned at the picture. He had one like it at home, a photograph taken when the eighth grade graduated. Stoney knew that his name was on the back of that picture for he had written it there.

"Funny," Harry Delehante said. "No matter how much I wash, my wife claims I still smell like a horse." He rolled a cigarette.

So Harry Delehante was married. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes, emerging from the towel, hung it on its nail, ran a comb through his brown thatch and accepted papers and tobacco. The office smelled of hay and grain, of neatsfoot oil and leather and, of course, of horse. Harry's wife might well be right. Stoney took a light from Harry's match and glanced at the telephone.

"New," Harry said, following that look. "We've had it in about a month."

"They're handy," Stoney stated.

"I'm tryin' to place you," Harry said. "Your face is familiar and it seems like I ought to know you. But I don't." It was an invitation but Stoney Rhodes chose to disregard it. He would have a little fun with Harry Delehante.

"I heard," he announced, "that there was a man over here named Joslin that might have a few horses to dispose of. Is that right? You know him, maybe?"

"Joslin?" Harry said. "Yeah, he might have some horses. Want to call him up?" He moved toward the phone.

"He's got a telephone on the ranch?"

"That's right." Harry Delehante paused beside the golden oak box. "The line runs in from the asphalt beds right past Joslin's place so he tied on to it." He grinned. "Fact is," he confided, "that's the way the whole thing started. Otto Zahl is developing the asphalt beds. He's formed a company and got a crew of men out there. Otto put in a phone to the depot and started the procession. Everybody's got one now, seems like. Sheriff, courthouse, the bank, most of the stores. Just turn the crank an' you're connected with the town." Suiting action to words, he turned the crank, the bell jingling as he rang. Receiver to ear, Harry waited for an answer.

"If you've got business to talk, wait till you see Joslin," he warned. "This telephone ain't exactly private. We've got no central office an' anybody that wants to listen, can. A lot of 'em do. Hello. Hello? Yes, Miss Minnie."

A voice crackled in the receiver. Harry cocked his head and listened. "Thanks, Miss Minnie. When will Frank be back?"

Again the voice in the receiver, full three minutes this time. Harry made little hushing gestures with his free hand and twice tried to break in. Finally: "I see. All right, Miss Minnie. Thanks." He hung up.

"Minnie Redfield, the sheriff's sister," he reported. "I don't think she's missed a call since Frank had his phone put in. That thing's a godsend to her."

Back in the fourth grade Stonewall Jackson Rhodes had learned to spell from Minnie Redfield. "What about Joslin?" he reminded.

"Oh, yeah," Harry Delehante said. "I like to forgot. Miss Minnie answered Joslin's ring. She says he called up Green

this noon an' ordered some sickle teeth an' that he'll be in town tonight. I'd forgot, but Joslin comes to town most every Saturday. He plays poker up at Price Sherry's. Regular affair. You could likely see him if you went to Sherry's."

"I never like to break into a poker game," Stonewall Jackson Rhodes announced. "I can call Joslin in the morning." He ground out his cigarette beneath his boot. "I'll go on uptown and squander around awhile, get a room at the hotel an' take a bath. So long."

The hotel was cross-cornered from the bank. Arriving at the bank corner Stoney Rhodes bethought himself. The four silver dollars he had given Eusabio Baca was the last of his change. His money was in a belt about his middle. He wheeled to enter the bank.

"Hey! Hey, you!"

Stoney halted. Quinn Spikesman was coming down the walk, hurrying toward him. For a moment Stoney thought he had been recognized, but a greeting was not Spikesman's mission. Spikesman wore a belt and gun, he wore a big black hat and highheeled boots and an opened vest. And on the vest there was a badge. Stoney had missed that badge out at Eusabio's.

"Yes?" he said.

Spikesman's eyebrows were drawn together in a puzzled frown. His voice rasped. "Can't carry a gun in town," he announced. "You got thirty minutes to get rid of it after you get in. That's the law."

"Thanks," Stoney drawled. "I'm going to the hotel. I'll just check it there."

Spikesman still frowned, trying to puzzle out something.

Thinks he's seen me someplace, Stonewall Jackson thought. Deputy sheriff and he's trying to figure it out. I'll bet he goes to the courthouse and looks at all the wanted notices when he leaves here.

"OK," the deputy said suddenly. "When you leave town you can put it on again if you pull right out."

"I'll do that," Stoney agreed, and entered the bank.

Old Karl Kimsey was still the banker. He was fussing around in his office and there was a new face behind the bars of the teller's cage. Stoney Rhodes fished in his money belt and then approached the window.

"I'd like change for this," he said, pushing out a hundred dollar bill. "Give me five dollars in silver."

The teller shuffled money impassively, counted it out.

"Thanks." Stoney pocketed the money, nodded to the teller and walked out. The dusk had come fully now and there were lights in the hotel. Time to get a room, a bath, and then to eat. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes crossed the street. Old Otto Zahl was on the hotel steps, looking at him.

CHAPTER TWO

High Steel Alibi

"NOBODY," Price Sherry asked, "saw you come in? You're sure of that, Sherm?"

The table was covered by a blanket, decorated with lamp and cards, with poker chips and glasses. Smoke hung over it, and five men sat around it.

Sherry was young, sharp-nosed, keen-eyed, mustached. Downtown, his shingle hung beside the bank. "Price Sherry, Att'y. at Law." Sherman Joslin was heavyset and plain; prosperous, too, if gold watch chain, if shopmade boots and storebought clothes spoke truth.

"Nobody saw me," Joslin assured. "Not a soul. I was late getting started and I got here after dark. I cut across and didn't come through town."

"That's item one," said Sherry. "Remember it." He looked at Quinn Spikesman. "Item two: This stranger

has four horses at Eusabio Baca's. They're in the corral. We can use those horses. The first thing then, is for Sherm to make a phone call to tell me he can't get in. We'll just do that now." Sherry got up, Sherm Joslin with him. The telephone was on the wall.

"The rest of you keep still," Sherry warned, and turned the crank: three long rings, two short rings. He held the receiver to his ear and beckoned Joslin close. He winked at the men by the table; nodded his head.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello. Price?" Joslin's mouth was close to the transmitter.

"Sherm?" Sherry said. "What's the matter? We've been waiting for you."

It was like a Punch and Judy show. Now Punch advanced to speak, now Judy. "I can't get in," Sherm Joslin said. "I didn't come in from the pasture until after dark. You boys go ahead and play without me."

"You can't make it?" Regret in Sherry's tone. "That's too bad, Sherm. Tilton's here, and Quinn and Green; everybody but you."

"Not tonight." Joslin took his turn at the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry but I expect I'll save money. I'll see you next Saturday. Tell the boys hello for me."

"I'll do that. Wish you were here, Sherm. So long."

"So long."

Sherry put the receiver on the hook. "She was there," he announced. "Miss Minnie was on the job. Now we can play a little poker."

Joslin sat down heavily. "I still don't like it," he said.

Sherry waved a negligent hand. "Right there is your alibi," he stated. "The sheriff's sister will swear to it that you were at your ranch. What more do you want?"

"I don't know," Joslin moved uneasily. "It's all right, I guess."

"Of course, it's all right." Price Sherry picked up the cards. "And it will be all right afterward, too. The train is due at eleven. Otto and Karl Kimsey will meet it and take the money to the bank. We'll meet them. Then Quinn calls up Narciso Sandoval at the jail. Miss Minnie won't miss that call. It's foolproof. My deal, isn't it?" The cards slid through his fingers, riffling as he shuffled.

No one's mind was on the cards and it was not poker that they played. Price Sherry, taking advantage of the others' abstraction, made small hands good. Sherm Joslin kept looking at his watch and so did Wilsey Green. Tilton, the saloon keeper, belly overflowing his belt, passed hand after hand, and Quinn Spikesman played continually with his stack of chips.

"Ten-thirty," Joslin announced, and stood up. "Price, you ought to come along. The rest of us take the risks and—"

"Suppose that telephone should ring with all of us gone?" Sherry interrupted. "Then what?"

"He's right, Sherm," Tilton said. "Come on, let's go." He hoisted himself from his chair, picked up his hat, lifted a slicker from the yellow pile in the corner of the room. "Let's go!" he said again. There was force in Ben Tilton. One by one, the others took hats and slickers. Quinn Spikesman slid into his, putting it on backward. Two holes, cut just below the collar, gave him vision.

"Hook the top," he directed.

Sherry hooked the top; performed a like function for the others.

"Damn, but this is hot!" Quinn Spikesman said, voice muffled.

They filed out, four men, yellow pommel slickers trailing. The door closed softly and, away to the south, a whistle wailed a station signal.

Price Sherry sat down beside the table, picked up the deck and began to lay out

a solitaire game. Now and again he glanced toward the phone as though expecting it to ring. The oak box remained silent.

TIME drawled along. The heavy beat of a starting engine came to the house at the edge of town. The whistle sounded again, loudly for a crossing, faintly for a second crossing. There were stealthy steps. The door opened and Sherry sprang up.

"Like clockwork!" Quinn Spikesman said, and dumped a package on the table. "Get this slicker off me."

Slickers were stripped off. A knife flashed and the package cover laid open. Money lay on the table, green bills, neatly banded.

"Get to the phone, Quinn," Sherry ordered. "Call the jail. Ask if anything's come up. Hurry!"

Quinn Spikesman went to the phone and rang. His heavy voice rasped in the room, demanding of the jailor if all was peaceful in Santa Inez.

"I'll come by before I turn in," Spikesman said. "We're going to play awhile longer, Narciso. Good-bye." He hung up.

Five piles of money lay on the table. Price Sherry's eyes were bright. "Eight thousand dollars," he said. "Sixteen hundred for each of us. Call the saloon, Ben. Sit down, men, and play poker. Let Ben's bartender hear you. Talk loud." He laughed gleefully.

Ben Tilton, heavy and phlegmatic, approached the telephone. "Dave?" His voice sounded loud in the room. "Tilton talkin'. Close up for me, will you? I won't be back tonight. . . . What's that? Wait a minute." He turned to the table about which voice rose. "Shut up, you fellows. Green, keep still a minute. What did you say, Dave? . . . Yeah, Green's winner so far. . . . OK, Dave. Good night."

The receiver was on its cradle again. Price Sherry was on his feet. "Pull out now!" he ordered. "Go with Sherm, Quinn. Make sure he gets those horses and gets clear. Here, take your money!"

Eager hands fumbled for piles of currency. Quinn Spikesman and Sherman Joslin went out. Price Sherry sank into a chair and stared at Tilton and Green.

"Waiting was the worst part," he said. "Tell me: how did it go?"

"We stopped Otto and Kimsey at the bank alley," Tilton answered. "They didn't even see us. I could have done the job alone." He pulled a cigar from his vest pocket and eyed it. "I hit Otto and Quinn took Kinsey. We took the package and pulled out."

"How bad—?" Sherry began.

"They were both breathin'," Tilton said. "Hell! I know how hard to hit a man, an' so does Spikesman. If Sherm gets away all right, we're set."

"He'll get away," Sherry assured. "That business with the horses is the last touch. Sherm will turn them loose in the Sinkholes. Quinn says he looked through his wanted notices for the man that owns 'em and couldn't find him, but he knows he's seen him someplace. His face is familiar."

"Then all we've got to do is wait for Quinn." Tilton lighted his cigar. "You're smart, Price. Wilsey, you're white as a sheet. Take a drink, a big one."

Wilsey Green reached for the bottle and filled a glass. He drank, gulped and drank again.

"Get hold of yourself," Tilton advised.

Now there was quiet in the room. Cards were forgotten and three men waited where one had sat before. Every man came to his feet as the door opened and Quinn Spikesman came in.

"Did Sherm—?" Sherry began.

"Sherm got away." Spikesman's face was pale. "We caught the horses an' were tyin' 'em to lead when that damned Eusabio came out. I had to kill him. He

saw us both." The deputy sat down and reached for the bottle. On the wall, the telephone shrilled.

"The bank's ring," Sherry said. "Wait."

Spikesman took his drink, half a tumblerful. Tilton and Green were eyeing him, but Sherry watched the telephone. It rang again, three long, two short. Like a terrier Sherry was up and to the instrument. "Hello? . . . Yes, this is Price Sherry . . . Quinn? I'll call him. Just a minute." He held out the receiver.

"Hello?" Quinn Spikesman at the telephone now. "Yes, this is Spikesman . . . I see, Mrs. Kimsey . . . . Yes, I see . . . . I'll go right down. Don't worry. I'll go right down."

He returned the receiver, wheeled and faced the others. "Karl Kimsey hasn't come home from the bank," he said, "an' Mrs. Kimsey's worried. She called up, and Miss Minnie told her I was here. Come on. You're all goin' to help me look for Kimsey. Come on, Price. This time you go, too.

CHAPTER THREE

The Hoosegow Hellcat

A MAN might as well be naked as in drawers and shirt. Stoney Rhodes made this decision at five o'clock. At four, rousing automatically, he had recalled where he was and had gone to sleep again, but at five he stayed up. Dolf Harmstetter, round-faced, big-eyed and frightened, wakened Stoney Rhodes, and behind Dolf was Quinn Spikesman, heavy and scowling and with a big gun in his hand. Yes, at five o'clock Stonewall Jackson Rhodes certainly felt naked. He sat up in bed and stared at the intruders.

"Mr. Spikesman says—" Dolf began.

Quinn Spikesman pushed past Dolf. "You're under arrest," he stated forcefully. "Get up an' get dressed. No use of you playin' innocent. We got you cold."

Stoney sat up and swung bare feet over the edge of the bed. Clothing and gun were stacked on a chair nearby. Spikesman possessed himself of the gun. "Your pals got away," he said. "They took them horses you brought for 'em an' killed Eusabio Baca when they done it. If you was smart you'd of gone with 'em. Get your clothes on."

"Pals?" Stoney said. The sleep was leaving his mind. He stared at Dolf Harmstetter. "What's he talking about?"

Dolf spread plump hands far apart. "The bank was robbed. I tell him you wass in the hotel but he says neffer mind, that you got out und done it. He says—"

"Shut up, Dolf," Spikesman ordered. "He's just playin' innocent. Go on. Get dressed like I told you."

Stoney Rhodes got dressed. Trailed by Spikesman and Harmstetter he went down the stairs and through the lobby where curious early risers stared at him. Spikesman, money belt and gun belt looped across his arm, kept his weapon out and centered.

From the lobby the procession went on down the street to the courthouse, through the sheriff's office to the jail. The door clanged shut and a key was turned. Spikesman put his gun away.

"I wish you'd tell me what this is all about, Quinn," Stoney said. It was time now to quit playing cute; time to disclose his identity, to tell his name. "Dolf said the bank was robbed an'—"

"You know what it's about," Spikesman interrupted, while the jailor, behind him, peered curiously into the cell. "An' you won't get anyplace callin' me by my name, neither."

"Look," said Stoney, "I'm Stonewall Jackson—"

"Don't be funny!" Again the deputy interrupted. "You got plenty of aliases, I'll bet. Use one that's got sense."

Stoney closed his mouth. Ideas flashed

into his mind. Was this a joke? Had Harry Delehante or Quinn Spikesman recognized him and framed this up? It was a lot like some of the ideas Harry used to have. But no, Dolf Harmstetter had been too careful, too frightened. Somebody had robbed the bank. This was no joke.

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes turned his back and took two steps to the hard cot in the cell. He sat down and looked at the men beyond the bars.

"What name do you want to use?" Spikesman demanded. "I've got to book you."

"Stonewall Jackson's good enough," said Stoney Rhodes. He searched his vest for papers and tobacco, found and combined them.

"Still smart," Spikesman said. "You won't be so smart when we catch your pals. Watch out for him, Narciso."

Spikesman and the jailor went out and Stoney lighted his cigarette. He smoked it to a stub, lighted another from that stub. The corridor door opened and a wispy, gray-haired man came in. He peered bright and birdlike at the prisioner.

"Bank robber," said the wispy man. "Never had one before. I'm day jailor. Name's Prine. You hungry?"

"Hungry and thirsty both," Stoney Rhodes admitted.

THE WISPY man flitted off, returning presently with a five-pound lard can. He pushed this through the door wicket and Stoney drank.

"Ordered breakfast from the restaurant," Prine said. "Half an hour."

"Where's Spikesman?" Stoney demanded, "an' where's the sheriff?"

"Sheriff's gone to Santa Fe with a prisioner. Spikesman's out chasin' your friends with a posse. Want to tell me how you done it?"

"How I did what?"

"How you took Otto Zahl's money. Make it easier on you if you turn state's evidence. Eusabio Baca's dead but you don't look like no murderer to me. Likely you was back in the hotel when your pardners killed him."

"Get this," said Stonewall Jackson Rhodes. "I didn't take Zahl's money. I didn't kill Eusabio. If my horses were stolen—" He paused. "I won't say a word until I talk to the sheriff," Stoney Rhodes completed.

"You'll feel better after you've had breakfast," Prine phophesied, and went out again.

The prophesy was wrong. Breakfast was cold, the coffee tepid in its cup, grease congealing on the eggs. Prine took the dishes and Stoney Rhodes sat on the cot, sometimes smoking, sometimes abstract with thought, the cigarette forgotten in his fingers. The church bells rang, bidding the faithful to service. Prine came in carrying two stools, a checked board and a small box.

"Play checkers?" he asked.

Stoney sensed that the jailor meant to be kind, to take his mind from his troubles, but he did not want to play checkers.

"Not today," he said. "Thanks."

Prine left and Stoney stretched out on the cot again.

He thought about Eusabio. When Stoney was a little boy Eusabio had worked for old Jess Rhodes. Eusabio had taught Stoney to braid leather and to spin strands of horsehair and make a girt. Eusabio told long tales of *bultos*, things that haunted treasure buried in the hills, and other tales of Indian fights. Eusabio was dead.

Stoney stared at the barred ceiling. Eusabio was dead and four horses were gone. To a man outside it looked all right —it looked perfect—but a man who knew, could see the hole.

Voices roused him from his thoughts.

"You can't come in here, Miss Minnie!" Prine's voice was a wailing plaint.

"Quinn Spikesman told me not to let anybody see the prisoner. He said—"

"Nonsense." Stoney Rhodes sat up. He knew that voice. "My own brother the sheriff and you try to keep me out of his jail? I do declare, Lott Prine, you must be foolish. I'm going to see the prisioner."

There was brisk movement. Prine objected futilely. Miss Minnie Redfield strode purposefully along the corridor in front of the cells.

Miss Minie looked just as she always had. Tall, thin as a reed and shaped like one; gray hair in a bun under an atrocious hat; black eyes snapping behind her glasses; chin and mouth firm. Take away the hat, add a pointer and a blackboard for background, and Stony Rhodes would have been in the fourth grade again.

Miss Minnie paused before the cell and peered through the bars. She straightened. Height and breadth, mustache, clothing, none of those physical changes mattered to Miss Minnie; her sharp black eyes pierced through those minor changes. "Why," she said. "Why, I—"

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes shook his head swiftly and warningly. Stonewall Jackson's finger crossed his lips, admonishing silence. Miss Minnie closed her mouth firmly and at that moment Providence turned a distant crank and the telephone tinkled in the sheriff's office.

"That's your ring," Miss Minnie snapped. "Answer it."

Lott Prine went to the office and his voice came back to them as he said, "Hello?"

Stoney took a long step to the bars. "You're Stonewall Jackson Rhodes," Miss Minnie stated, low-voiced. "I had you in the fourth grade in school. Why did you stop me from speaking your name? Ashamed?"

"No," Stoney Rhodes answered. "You're right, Miss Minnie. You had me in the fourth grade. And I've got to see your brother. I've got to talk to him before anybody here knows who I am."

Black eyes and blue eyes met steadily. "You were always a good boy, Stonewall," Miss Minnie said. "A little mischievous, maybe, but not bad. I knew your mother, too."

"Promise, Miss Minnie?"

The gray head and the awful hat bobbed briefly.

"That was Quinn Spikesman callin' from Joslin's place," Lott Prine announced. "They lost the trail out in the Sinkholes, but they ain't give up."

"Hmmmpf!" Miss Minnie snorted as she once did at a misspelled word. "That Quinn Spikesman! He always was a dummy!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Big Jailbreak

FRANK Redfield sat on a stool in the corridor and Stoney Rhodes squatted in the cell. The time was midnight. Redfield had arrived on the eleven o'clock train, talked to Miss Minnie and then had come on to the courthouse. Narciso Sandoval, night jailor, was in the sheriff's office, banished there because Stoney would talk only to the sheriff. He had been talking and was still talking.

"Those horses," Stoney said, "were outlaws, Mr. Redfield. You couldn't get a saddle on one unless you tied up a foot or threw him. You couldn't mount one unless you blindfolded him or eared him down. And any man that tried one of 'em was due for a bronc ride an' likely to get throwed. Does that sound like bank robber horses?"

The sheriff was heavy-bodied, slow-moving, but keen-eyed. He wore a drooping longhorn mustache which he tugged when angry or pleased or disturbed by any emotion. He tugged it now.

"It don't," he agreed. "If what you say is so."

"It's so." Stoney was very positive. "You can wire Nate Summerfield over at Tucumcari. He sold me a sorrel horse branded V Bar on the hip an' Rafter 7 on the neck. Ask him about that horse."

"Hmmm," Redfield said. He gave no indication that he would do as asked. In fact, he gave no indication whatever.

"That money was taken by a bunch right here in town." Stonewall Jackson Rhodes pursued the subject. "There are men here who knew about Zahl's payroll an' how it was handled. I've been thinking about it while I waited to see you, and I've got it figured out.

"This town bunch worked on Otto Zahl an' Kimsey an' stole the money. They had one or two men get my horses an' lead 'em into the Sinkholes. Those horses could be led without much trouble. That's the way I handled 'em. While they were getting the horses, Eusabio came out of his house an' recognized the men, so they killed him. It's local talent you're looking for, Mr. Redfield. That's what it is." Stoney spoke earnestly.

Frank Redfield got up. "Maybe," he said noncommittally. "What were you goin' to do with those horses?"

"I was going to get a carload together and ship 'em to the south." Stoney also came to his feet. "There's a market for horses. They'll take anything they can hitch to a plow. Mr. Redfield, this business of my being in jail is all wrong. Sure, I went to the bank and changed a bill, but I wasn't looking the bank over. And I didn't even know Zahl had a payroll until I got to town. I'm not lyin' to you."

Redfield still thoughtfully tugged at his mustache. "I just got to town," he reminded. "I talked to Minnie and came down here. He surveyed the prisoner dispassionately. "Stayin' in jail awhile won't hurt you anyhow, even if you're right an' what you say is so." He started toward the sheriff's office.

"Mr. Redfield—" Stoney called.

Frank Redfield did not look back.

"Well, damn it!" said Stoney Rhodes angrily.

The office door closed and voices murmured behind it. Stoney Rhodes retired to the cot in the cell and sat down. "Try to help him," he muttered, "an' he don't say, 'boo.' To hell with him! Wish I could get out of here; I'd show him."

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes was young, and intolerant of any ideas but his own. He was mad, and of course, he had no idea of Frank Redfield's reaction. How could Stoney Rhodes know that the sheriff had foregathered with Miss Minnie? How could Stoney Rhodes know what the sheriff told his sister?

"He's about right," Frank Redfield said. "It's a local job. Somebody here in town robbed Otto and Karl."

"What are you going to do?" Miss Minnie asked.

"Check up on everybody," her brother answered grimly. "Find out where every last soul was, and what they were doing."

"And what about Stonewall?" Miss Minnie was genuinely concerned regarding the welfare of her former pupil.

"I'll keep him in jail awhile." Frank Redfield held up a hand, checking Miss Minnie's expostulations. "It won't hurt him. And if he's in jail, the men that did this will feel safer. They'll think I'm gettin' evidence against him and they'll think I'm looking for the man that helped him. Maybe one of them will make a mistake."

Miss Minnie nodded her gray head. "That's wise, Frank," she agreed. "And he will be safe in jail."

SO, IN the morning, Stonewall Jackson Rhodes fumed in his cell, and Frank Redfield set about the business of the law. While Stoney Rhodes shaved and put on a clean shirt brought by Lott Prine, Frank Redfield spoke to this man and to that one, inquiring if his prisioner had been seen; inquiring, too, as to where the man he

questioned had spent Saturday night. The sheriff was a blunt man, not given to subtlety. His idea was good, but his execution was poor. So poor, indeed, that in the afternoon when Quinn Spikesman returned to Santa Inez, Price Sherry was on the street wiating for him.

"I've got to see you," Sherry said when Quinn rode over in answer to his call. "Come down to the office as soon as you can."

Quinn nodded agreement and went on to the courthouse. There the posse dispersed. In the sheriff's office Quinn Spikesman reported to his superior and answered Redfield's questions.

"Don't seem like we've got much to hold this boy on," the sheriff said, nodding his head toward the jail. "There's not a lot of evidence against him. He claims to have been asleep in the hotel when the money was taken, an' that whoever took it stole his horses. Maybe he's right."

"He was in on it," Spikesman said positively. "I'm sure of that. I've seen him someplace, Frank. I think he's wanted, an' that we've got a notice on him. I checked through and couldn't find a notice but I'm sure we've got it."

"Well," Redfield said, "maybe. Anyhow, we'll hold him awhile. Here's a list of serial numbers on the money, Quinn. The El Paso bank telegraphed it to me. I've sent it out over the state an' to Colorado an' Texas. When that money begins to turn up we'll have something to work on."

Swearing under his breath, Quinn Spikesman left the sheriff. He went directly to Sherry's office.

"I don't like things too well," Sherry said when he and the deputy were alone. "The sheriff has been going around town this morning talking to a lot of people. That's all right, but what isn't all right is that he's asking where they were when Otto Zahl and Kimsey were robbed. It looks like the old boy is suspicious."

"What I don't like is this." Spikesman brought out the list of currency numbers. "Redfield's sent this all over the state and into Colorado and Texas. If we can't use the money, what good is it?"

"I can take care of that," Sherry answered confidently. "Bring your share to my place Saturday night when we play poker. I'll tell the others to bring theirs, but you'll have to get word to Joslin. We'll get the money together and take it down into Mexico, change it there and then change the Mexican money back when we re-cross the line. Don't worry about the money, Quinn. Worry about this other thing."

Spikesman's eyebrows made a black line across his forehead. "Redfield says we haven't got much to hold this fellow on," he informed. "He's goin' to keep him a day or so an' then turn him loose. That don't look good to me."

"Suppose," Sherry drawled, "that he was to try a jailbreak. Wouldn't that make Redfield think the way we want him to? Wouldn't our sheriff believe that he held the real bank robber and that it was an outside job? Seems so to me."

"Might." Spikesman nodded. "Yeah. It would. But if this fellow—Stonewall Jackson, he calls himself—got away—"

"I didn't say anything about him geting away. I said if he was to try a jailbreak. He's taken out of his cell twice a day, at least. If he tried to get away and was killed—" Sherry reached into the drawer of his desk and produced a derringer, short, double-barreled, wicked. "This could be found on him. It could go into him with his grub. And there would be a note signed, 'Butch,' or some such name. That would cinch it. When he started out the courthouse door you'd just happen to be there with a shotgun. Of course, he wouldn't stop until you shot."

"Why me?" Spikesman demanded.

"Why not somebody else? Eusabio—"

"You're the logical man, Quinn," Sherry drawled. "Who else would be on deck? And speaking of Eusabio: will another man make any difference?"

Spikesman picked up the derringer and turned it between blunt fingers, broke it open and looked at the dull brass of the shells. "Write the note," he said hoarsely. "I'll get this in to him some way."

Sherry laughed. "Not some way, but the way I'll tell you," he stated. "And I'll write the note. Now listen. Here's what you do."

PRICE Sherry and Quinn Spikesman were not the only disturbed souls in Santa Inez that day, nor were they alone in taking action. Harry Delehante, calling the bank that morning, leaned against the telephone as he waited for an answer, and stared at the picture on the wall. Harry was a stubborn man and when a thing bothered him it really bothered him.

On Saturday Harry had been sure that somewhere, at some time before, he had seen Stonewall Jackson Rhodes. On Sunday, with Stonewall Jackson prominent as a suspected robber and in jail, Harry had puzzled more than ever. Now, Monday morning the puzzlement remained. Harry stared at the picture and then, slowly, hung up the telephone receiver. Still deliberately, he reached for the photograph and took it down. One face he looked at, and then, turning the picture over, scanned the names scrawled on the back.

"I knew it!" Harry Delehante said. "Stoney Rhodes!" He sat down, holding the picture in his hands and remembering things, recollections filling his mind. As has been said, he was a stubborn man, and a friend once made was a friend retained. Presently, rising, he replaced the picture then left the office. Adjacent to the wagon yard was a blacksmith shop, not in use but still fully equipped.

Harry Delehante visited the blacksmith shop and then, returning to the barn office, put on his coat despite the heat of the day. The clock said twelve noon. Harry picked up a bar of soap from the washbench, and put it in his pocket; then as an afterthought he added a ball of twine.

"Goin' to dinner, Blas," Harry called to the hostler and, not waiting for a reply, went out. There was a clump of cottonwoods and a shed back of the courthouse, screening it. Harry Delehante, strolling along the almost deserted streets, made for that spot, not directly but casually, just taking his time, innocent as a ten-year-old kid with a slingshot in his pocket and a broken window behind him.

STONEWALL Jackson Rhodes, eating dinner, seated on the cot with the barred window above him, heard rock strike the wall. He looked around. A stone tied to a string, dangled through the window. Stoney stepped up on the cot, seized the string and pulled.

First came a note tied to the string, then a hacksaw with a new blue blade. A short and heavy pinch bar followed, and at the end of the twine was attached a cake of soap. Tools and string went under the mattress of the cot. The note read:

> Stoney:
> I do not believe you killed Eusabio or stole the money. I remember you too well. Your horse will be in the barn and I will be waiting for you tonight.
>
> Harry.
>
> P. S. Use soap to keep the saw from squeaking. Burn this.

So much for trust. So much for a thirteen year-old who had sworn eternal friendship and did not forget at twenty-three. Warmth filled Stonewall Jackson Rhodes. He burned the note.

The afternoon was endless. Frank Redfield came in, inspected the prisoner and the cell, then went out. Quinn Spikesman walked into the jail and stared hard at the

prisoner before leaving. Finally the light of day began to dim and Prine came in with a supper-laden tray. He opened the wicket in the cell door to pass the dishes through, and Spikesman called from the office.

"Lott, I'm goin' out to eat. Stay on till Narciso comes."

"All right," Lott Prine agreed, pushed the last dish through and went back to the office.

The dishes were covered. Stoney had complained to Prine about the coldness of the food and the jailor had done his best to keep things hot. Removing the covers, Stoney saw meat and potatoes, mingled with peas on a plate. The coffee was in a pot.

A second plate held biscuits and—Stoney's eyes widened in surprise—among the biscuits, cradled in a napkin, was a short, blue, double-barreled gun. A derringer. Stoney hastily thrust the weapon into his pocket and sat down, but not to eat.

Harry had not sent the gun. Stoney was sure of that. Harry would have tied the weapon to the twine, along with the tools. No. This gift came from someone else, someone who wanted Stonewall Jackson Rhodes to make a jailbreak. Prine? Not likely. The sheriff? No chance of that. Who, then?

Mechanically Stoney Rhodes reached for knife and fork. He did not taste the food he swallowed, nor did he arrive at an answer. But he did reach a decision. He had been given two ways out of jail: one way with saw and pinch bar, the other with the gun. He had a choice and made it.

Prine came back for the dishes. "Want to go out a minute?" he asked, nodding toward the door at the corridor's end.

"Not right now," Stoney answered.

"I wish Narciso would get here," Prine complained, receiving the dishes through the wicket. "He's always late."

Narciso came in due time, relieved Prine and inspected his prisioner. The prisioner sat on his cot. Narciso went back to the office and read an El Paso paper.

After a time Harry Delehante drifted in for a visit. Harry was talkative, filled with conversation, and he kept shuffling his feet. He acted as though he had the itch. He made a great deal of noise. Quinn Spikesman came in briefly, asked about the prisioner and went out again. He seemed to have something on his mind. At ten o'clock, Harry Delehante left.

At ten fifteen, yawning, Narciso walked back into the jail. At ten sixteen Narciso's yell echoed loud.

Quinn Spikesman appeared as though by magic. Above the cot the cell window showed two bars pried back and the cell was empty. Narciso fled to the office, seized the crank of the telephone and twisted madly.

"Frank?" Narciso shrilled. "The prisoner's escaped. Get down here right away."

CHAPTER FIVE

Follow That Killer!

THE RIVER had always been a playground for all the youth of Santa Inez. In fall and winter they hunted rabbits along the bottoms. In the summer there was fishing. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes went down the river through the night. Brown Jug was sure-footed as a goat and the river had not changed. Stoney Rhodes knew where he was.

There had been no time for talk to Harry Delehante. A hasty word or so, that was all. Thanks expressed, an assurance of innocence, the soap and string, the hacksaw and the pinchbar dumped down.

"Hell, Stoney," Harry had said. "I know you didn't do it. Now make tracks.

Write to me when you get clear. OK?"

"I will, Harry," Stoney promised. A hasty handshake. That was all.

Now, in the river bottom, Stoney Rhodes set about following a plan. His escape would be detected soon, of that he was sure, and a search would be instigated immediately. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes did not intend to run. He had given Frank Redfield a good start toward the discovery of the actual culprits and Redfield had miscued.

So the thoughts ran in Stoney's mind. Now he, Stonewall Jackson Rhodes, was out of jail and free to move about. *He* would not miscue nor would he leave Santa Inez. Stoney Rhodes intended to find the men who had robbed Otto Zahl and Karl Kimsey. He intended to discover the murdurer of Eusabio Baca. Just how he would do this he was not sure, but he had a starting place and a place of concealment.

He swung Brown Jug out of the bottom and sent the horse scrambling up over a rocky bank. Rocks would not take tracks too well. Stoney grinned in the darkness. He had traveled in water, too, following the shallows for a distance. Kids played outlaw and posse up and down the river. So now, again, did Stoney Rhodes, only this time it was in earnest.

From the bank, Brown Jug traversed a little distance and stopped at a straggling fence. Stoney dismounted, held the fence down and led Jug across. He was in an alfalfa patch, recently cut.

Stoney led Jug across the alfalfa, staying on the ground so that, should there be anyone to see, they would not spy a rider on a horse. He entered a little yard where was a corral and a hay stack and a squat adobe house. The house door opened when he turned the knob and pushed.

Brown Jug, well-broken, was alarmed at the door, but allowed himself to be coaxed inside. Stoney closed the door. He dared not risk a match. Brown Jug stood while Stoney explored by sense of touch. This was Eusabio Baca's house and, therefore, safe. Stoney eased the cinch on Jug and sat down to wait.

At dawn Stoney Rhodes slipped out of the house. The light was faint in the eastern sky as he went to the corral and stack. He gathered armfuls of hay and took them back to Jug. A saddle rope lay in the corral, its coil loose.

Stoney picked it up and took it in. He carried water in a bucket from the well, gave Jug a drink and brought more water. Then, with the door closed, he sat down again.

There had been tracks about the corral and house, but all the sign had been fouled. Too many people had been here since Eusabio was killed. Stoney had expected this, still there had been a chance that he might see something the others had missed.

The light was growing and as the sun sent its rays through the window, there came the sound of horses passing by on the road. Stoney risked a look. A little body of men were riding east, beyond the house. Stoney grinned. In one thing he had been a true prophet: no one was going to stop at a dead man's house to look for an escaped prisioner or to ask questions. That was a posse on the road. In his brief glimpse, Stoney had recognized Frank Redfield.

The morning crawled along endlessly. There was water, thanks to Stoney's providence, and there was hay for Jug, but there was no food in the house save dried beans and chili. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes killed time. He smoked a cigarette. He took a drink of water. He picked up the loose coils of the rope, threw them out and recoiled the rope, his hands moving automatically, his eyes blank. And then there was suddenly no automatic movement. Once again Stoney Rhodes coiled the rope, and then again, and the lines on his face were grim, hard lines, and his eyes

were narrowed with tense thought.

"That's it," he said. "That's got to be it."

Brown Jug stamped an impatient foot and pointed his ears. Most of the hay was gone and Brown Jug wearied of inactivity.

NOW the time really crawled. Now it was endless. Stoney Rhodes moved restlessly in the little dirt-floored room. He took brief looks out of the windows, always careful, always watchful, riding his impatience as a man rides a half-broken horse, never losing control.

And finally, after some days or months or years, the sun went down. And finally dark came. And finally Stonewall Jackson Rhodes tightened Jug's saddle and led the brown horse from the house, mounted and rode.

Stoney rode back up river and reached the town. He skirted it. He tied Brown Jug behind a shed. He moved through the darkness to a house where a lamp burned. He knocked on a door.

The door opened. "Miss Minnie," Stoney said, "it's me. I've got to see the sheriff. Where is he?"

Minnie Redfield was framed in the light. She could not see Stoney. Her voice was calm. "Come in, Stonewall," she directed. "Frank is with a posse looking for you." She stepped back from the door and, moving swiftly, Stoney followed. He closed the door and put his back against it.

"I've found something, Miss Minnie," Stoney blurted. "I've got a lead on the man who killed Eusabio." In Stoney's hand were two tightly coiled saddle ropes.

"Sit down, Stonewall," Miss Minnie directed. In her dressing gown and with her hair braided she looked quite as formidable as in her Sunday dress. "Tell me about it."

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes sat down. He put the ropes on the kitchen table and he talked. Miss Minnie listened. Occasionally she nodded. Twice she spoke: once to say that her brother now believed Stoney connected with the robbery and murder; again to state that she did not share that belief.

"And that's it." Stoney said in conclusion. "Miss Minnie, who is left-handed around town? That's what I've got to know."

"I wish you'd show me what you mean," Miss Minnie said, disregarding the question.

Stoney Rhodes stood and picked up a rope. "This is mine," he said. "Watch." He tossed out the rope, holding honda and loop in his right hand. He coiled the rope, each coil falling smoothly into place. He put that rope aside.

"This is the one I found." Stoney picked up the other rope and tossed it out. Again he held loop and honda in his right hand, and once more again he coiled. But now the coils refused to form. Instead, as the rope was laid, small figure-eights were made.

"You see?" Stoney demanded. He transferred loop and honda to his left hand. He used his right hand to coil the rope, and now the figure-eights were gone, the coils forming smoothly. "A rope takes a lay from the way it's coiled," Stoney explained.

"A left-handed man does things just backward from a right-handed man. This rope belonged to a left-handed man. Eusabio couldn't raise his left arm shoulder high. This rope couldn't be his. Whoever killed him, left it there. He was ropin' my horses an'—"

"Be still, Stonewall," Miss Minnie said. "I'm trying to think."

Stoney Rhodes was silent.

"There's Tom Garcia," Miss Minnie said. "I had a hard time teaching him to write. But Tom works in a store. And there was Bert Rutherford, but he's moved away. And Sherman Joslin. I had him when I first began to teach. But it

couldn't be Sherman. I'm certain of that, Stonewall."

"Why not?"

"Because he was at his ranch Saturday night."

"How do you know?" Stoney's voice was hard. "He's a cowman. He would carry a rope."

"Stonewall," Miss Minnie said, "I'm an old woman and I have few amusements. Sometimes I listen when the phone rings." She blushed and shook her head. "That isn't true. I always listen if I can. Last Saturday night I heard Sherman Joslin call Price Sherry. Price Sherry and Quinn Spikesman and Ben Tilton and Wilsey Green all play poker with Sherman every Saturday night. They always play at Mr. Sherry's—because he's a bachelor, I suppose. Sherman telephoned Mr. Sherry and said that he could not get in from his ranch and for them to play without him."

The lamplight caught and gleamed from the bright varnish of the telephone on the kitchen wall. Stonewall Rhodes and Miss Minnie Redfield stared at the telephone.

"Miss Minnie," Stoney said gently, "folks know that you listen on the telephone. They know that you hear what goes on."

"I suppose so." Miss Minnie did not look at her visitor.

"Miss Minnie," Stoney continued, "suppose we called up somebody from here and talked to them, first you talking and then me. Suppose I said that I was at the bank or at the livery barn. Could anyone listening in, tell the difference?"

There was a long pause. "I'm an old fool!" Minnie Redfield announced. "Of course they couldn't. Why, that's just what they planned, Stonewall. They planned for me to say that Sherman was at the ranch on Saturday night."

"Maybe. Maybe not, Miss Minnie." Stonewall Jackson Rhodes' eyes sparkled. "But whoever beat Eusabio to death was a left-handed man. I'll go out to Joslin's." He picked up the two saddle ropes.

"Leave the one you found here with me," Miss Minnie directed. "Wait, Stonewall, I'll wrap up some food for you to take." She hurried out of the kitchen. Stoney Rhodes waited impatiently.

MISS Minnie returned, carrying a snub-nosed Colt and a newspaper. She bustled from meat safe and cupboard to kitchen table. She wrapped a parcel and found a piece of string.

"There," she announced. The parcel was heavy in Stoney's hand for she had wrapped the gun in with the meat and bread. "And Stonewall, you be careful. I'll not tell Frank that you were here. He wouldn't believe what you have told me. He thinks you are guilty because you broke out of jail. If you find out anything, you come straight back here and tell me."

"All right, Miss Minnie." Stoney's hand was on the door knob. He paused, dropped his hand and turned back.

"Miss Minnie," said Stonewall Jackson Rhodes, "you're a dead game sport and a gentleman." He took one long step, kissed Miss Minnie Redfield squarely on the lips, and then was gone. The door closed gently and Minnie Redfield, eyes wide, stood stock still in the middle of her kitchen. Then, slowly, she raised her hand and touched her lips and her eyes were soft.

"That boy!" said Miss Minnie. "Calling me a gentleman!"

Brown Jug, retrieved from behind the shed, traveled steadily through the night. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes, Miss Minnie's gun shoved into his waistband, munched cold meat and bread and found them good. There was even a piece of pie, much crushed, but succulent, and Stoney licked his fingers appreciatively.

With an all-day rest, Brown Jug was not at all weary. With a mind full of ideas and a belly full of food, Stoney was not

tired. He followed a line of telephone poles across the broken, tumbled country of the Sinkholes. The poles loomed black against the starlit night. Well before morning, in a small depression, Stoney stopped, unsaddled and picketed Brown Jug to graze while he slept for a time. The August night was soft and warm about him.

With first light Stoney moved on, traveling half a mile. He saw a house, barns and sheds and corrals. He rode back to the Sinkhole and hid Brown Jug. On foot, Stoney retraced his steps and lay quietly watching from a ridge above the ranch.

And as he watched, life stirred at the house. First there was smoke from the chimney. Then a man came out, small in the distance, saddled a horse and rode from the corral.

He returned presently, driving the remuda before him, and penned them expertly. Unsaddling, he went back to the house. Stoney bethought himself of the remnants of Miss Minnie's lunch and swore because he had left them with his saddle. Those people were eating breakfast down there.

Now, after half an hour, six men came out of the house and went to the corral. Carefully as he watched Stoney could discern no left-handed roper. Five men saddled and rode away. One, detaching himself from the group, loped back and spoke to the man left at the house, the other riders waiting as he did so.

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes burrowed deep into his place of concealment as the rider rejoined the others and they came up the ridge. They passed within a hundred yards of where he lay and he was glad that Brown Jug was hidden and that the brush was thick. Quinn Spikesman rode at the head of the posse. The others, Stoney did not know. They were gone then, and he raised his head to watch the house again.

Nothing interesting happened for a long time. No one came out, there was no movement save of the few horses left in the corral. Then a man appeared and Stoney hoped that he would leave, but he did not. He went into a shed and presently the rhythmical clink of a hammer on metal sounded and smoke came from the shed.

The ranchman—Joslin, Stoney was sure—reappeared, went to the pen, roped a horse and led it to the shed. He shod the horse, taking his time, pausing between forefeet and hindfeet to take a smoke. The sun was high and it was noon. Joslin disappeared.

Thirst and hunger tortured Stonewall Jackson Rhodes and he developed a full passion for tobacco. He had the makings but he dared not smoke and the Bull Durham was too dry to chew in his dry mouth. Stoney swore again and stayed in his bushes.

After a time Joslin came out. He caught the horse he had shod and saddled leisurely. He rode away and Stoney Rhodes, when Joslin was out of sight, went down the slope.

His first concern was water. He took a drink at the well and another from the bucket inside the house. The door was unlocked and offered him no resistance.

There were two rooms in the house, a kitchen where Stoney stood, and a second room. There were beds in the second room, bedding on them. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes scratched his head thoughtfully and approached a bed. A bed is a man's own personal property, a good safe place. Cowmen put things in their beds, spare clothing, chaps, such things. Why not money? The first bed disclosed nothing, nor did the second. But the third bed. . . .

Stoney straightened from his search, a thick green sheaf of bills in his hand. He looked at them, noting the paper bands about them. New money. Bank money. From outside came the pound of running

horses. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes cast a despairing look at the door, gave up the idea, and went out through the window in the back. He ran across a little open space and dived into the brush.

CHAPTER SIX

Number, Please. . . .

IN SANTA INEZ, at seven o'clock on Wednesday night, Frank Redfield held no peaceful frame of mind. Tuesday morning, accompanied by Quinn Spikesman and three others, he had started after an escaped prisoner. He had asked questions all along the river and, assured that no fugitive had passed that way, turned into the Sinkhole country. With Sherman Joslin added, the posse combed the Sinkholes and found exactly nothing.

They stayed overnight at Joslin's, leaving for town the following morning. Arriving at the courthouse, Sheriff Redfield found more reports than he could handle. Strange riders were appearing from all over the country and everybody was sending or bringing word about them.

The most promising report came from Bernabel Chavez down river from town. Frank Redfield rode out three miles to see Bernabel, found another false alarm and, on the way home, stopped by Eusabio Baca's house. The door was open when it should have been closed.

Frank Redfield went in and, in the dead man's house, found unmistakable evidence that a horse had been kept there and that a man had stayed. Scattered hay, horse droppings, a cigarette butt or two told their story. Cursing like a mule skinner, Frank Redfield went back to town.

It was too late when he arrived, to do much of anything. Not over an hour of daylight remained. Instructing Quinn Spikesman to hold down the office and to be ready to start again with daylight, Sheriff Redfield went home. He did not tell Quinn Spikesman what he had found.

Miss Minnie fed her brother whom she had not seen since early Tuesday morning. She asked a lot of questions, each of which rubbed a sore spot. To escape them Frank Redfield sought the solitude of the back porch where he could smoke and fume all that he pleased. He was halfway down his cigar when the telephone rang, one shrill peal.

Miss Minnie answered. He could hear her voice but the words were not intelligible. At first Minnie seemed to be arguing about something, then she agreed. He heard her hang up, and then call Karl Kimsey's residence and talk briefly, then the hotel, then the depot and the livery barn. Everyone in Santa Inez who owned a telephone was a walking directory and Frank Redfield could tell whom his sister called, by the rings. Curious as to her activity, he went in the house.

"What in the world are you doing, Minnie?" the sheriff demanded.

"Getting witnesses," Miss Minnie answered. "Frank, you bring a chair over here and sit down. I want you to hold the receiver to your ear and listen."

"Listen to what?" the sheriff asked, but nevertheless picked up a chair and moved it to the telephone. When Miss Minnie used just that tone it was time to stand from under.

"I want you to listen to what happens at Price Sherry's house," Miss Minnie said. "Stonewall Rhodes is there and he has put a plug under the receiver so that the hook won't go down."

The full enormity of his sister's statement struck Frank Redfield. "Stonewall Rhodes?" the sheriff gasped. "At Sherry's?" Dropping the receiver, the sheriff came up out of his chair.

"Sit down and pick up that telephone!" Miss Minnie snapped. "Of course he's at Mr. Sherry's. He just called me from there. Now you sit down, Frank Redfield, and listen to me!"

The sheriff sat down.

MISS MINNIE REDFIELD was eminently correct. Stonewall Jackson Rhodes was in Price Sherry's house and, moreover, he had called Miss Minnie from there. His arrival at Sherry's was the culmination of a sequence of events.

When Stoney Rhodes went out the window of Sherman Joslin's ranch house, he took the bundle of money with him and when he hit the brush and flattened out, he still held that bundle. Also his breath. He continued to hold both and to try to still the pounding of his heart while he waited for discovery which he was certain would come.

But he was not discovered. Whoever had come into the house went out again and Stoney let go his breath. Rising to hands and knees he crawled away, the roughness of the surrounding country hiding him. Presently he got up and walked. He regained the vantage point of the ridge and looked down. Joslin was in the corral, changing horses.

Stoney watched while the shift was made, watched Joslin return to the house. Joslin reappeared suddenly, fairly popping out of the door. Joslin was plainly in a hurry. He ran to the corral, opened the gate, freed the horses Stoney had heard arrive, and went pounding off.

"Found his money gone," said Stoney Rhodes, rising, and he started back for Brown Jug.

It was nearing six o'clock when Stoney and Brown Jug sighted Santa Inez. All the way from Joslin's to town, Stoney had watched, trying to catch a glimpse of the rider who preceded him. Now above town, coming in from the Sinkholes, luck caught up with Stoney once more.

He saw his man—Joslin he was sure—just at the edge of town. Joslin did not strike for the main street but rode wide to a house which stood solitary above the town, no other house within a block of it. He left his horse there and disappeared.

Stoney Rhodes also circled, holding to the high country, to the edge of the Sinkholes. He arrived opposite the house just as Joslin and another came out. These two debated briefly and then, with Joslin riding, went toward the town.

"You stay here, Jug," Stoney instructed as he dismounted. To be sure he was obeyed, he tied the horse. Then, afoot, Stoney Rhodes went down the hill toward the house. Halfway along the slope he looked back. Brown Jug was hidden and Stoney hurried on.

He approached the house from the back, the building between himself and any prying eyes. The screen was hooked but his knife blade cared for that contingency. The backdoor was not locked and Stoney entered.

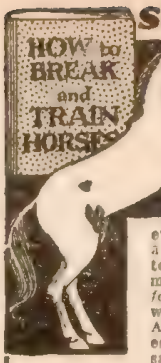
The kitchen showed disuse. Stoney remembered that Miss Minnie had described Price Sherry as a bachelor. This was, he believed, Sherry's house. From the kitchen he entered the livingroom. A brief glance at a letter lying on the table assured him that he was right. Price Sherry did live there. Casting about the living room Stoney found nothing of importance, but the bedroom was another matter.

Piled carelessly on the bedroom floor, near the unmade bed, were yellow pommel slickers and when Stoney lifted one he saw the eyeholes cut in the back below the collar. It was then that Stonewall Jackson Rhodes conceived his great idea. Dropping the telltale slicker he hurried to the telephone and rang once, long and hard. Miss Minnie answered all telephone rings and Stonewall Jackson wanted to talk to teacher.

"Miss Minnie?" he said, when he heard the receiver go up.

"Stonewall!" Minnie Redfield's voice carried shock and amazement over the wire.

"I'm Stonewall, all right," Stoney agreed. "Listen, Miss Minnie, an' do just



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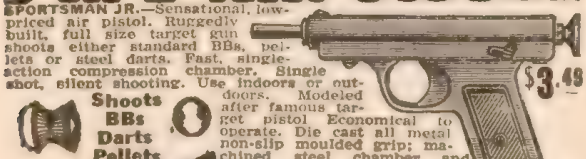

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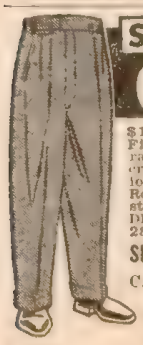

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what I say. I ain't got time to argue. I'm at Sherry's an' if you'll help me, we'll catch our robbers. All right, Miss Minnie. Now listen close."

Miss Minnie listened and Stoney Rhodes talked, swiftly, pointedly. He quit talking, put a match below the receiver hook, hung up the receiver and said, "Can you hear me?"

The receiver crackled an affirmative.

"OK," Stoney said, unaware that Miss Minnie hated the expression. "I'll hide now. OK, Miss Minnie." He left the livingroom, returning to the bedroom. He left the door open a crack. He crawled under the bed where there were shoes and old socks and piles of lint. He lay flat, Miss Minnie's snub-nosed Colt in his hand, the derringer hard in his pocket.

And he was not a moment too soon. Steps reverberated in the house, a screen door slammed, and Quinn Spikesman said, "I don't like this, Sherry. I'm supposed to be in the office. Redfield told me to be there. We're goin' out again in the morning."

"Don't worry about that," replied a voice that was strange to Stoney. Tension made the voices loud. "This thing is serious. Somebody stole Sherm Joslin's share of the money. Sherm will be here with Tilton an' Green in a minute. We've got to get to the bottom of this thing. There are just five of us that know about that money at all."

The men in Price Sherry's house could not know, of course, but it was at that exact moment that Frank Redfield handed over the transmitter and, hard-voiced, announced to his sister that he was going to Sherry's.

IN THE livingroom Quinn Spikesman looked, blank-faced, at Sherry, and under the bed Stonewall Jackson Rhodes grinned his glee. He had built better than he knew, better than he had hoped.

"Somebody stole Sherm's money?" Spikesman asked, incredulously.

"That's what I said."

Silence in the livingroom. Under the bed, Stoney hoped that the talk was loud enough for those who listened on the telephones to hear it. He hoped the match was still under the receiver hook. Again steps pounded, carried heavily to Stoney.

"I see you got Spikesman," someone rasped. "Green an' Tilton are comin'. They're right behind me." Now the speaker was identified as Joslin to the listening Stoney. More steps, more voices in the room.

"Sherm told us what happened. Green says he hasn't been out of town, an' neither have I been."

"That's right. I haven't been away from the store."

Stoney had them all placed now: Sherry's suave voice, Spikesman's harsh growl, Joslin's rasp, Tilton's rumble, and Green's higher tones. He could follow the talk, tell which man was speaking.

"Well," Spikesman said defensively, "I was with you last night, Sherm, and I came in with the sheriff. He's had me busy all day. I've been ridin' but not to your place."

"You're the only one that's been out, Quinn," Sherry said. "Of course, *if* you were with the sheriff—"

"Is that so?" Spikesman interrupted. "You were out. I saw you on a horse when I came in. What about that?"

"I rented that horse from Delehante's." Sherry's voice was filled with dignity. "I had to go down the river to the Chaves ranch. I'm handling a case for Bernabel and I had to see him. The sheriff was there while I talked to Bernabel."

"We're likely to ask Frank Redfield about you an' Quinn, ain't we?" Joslin rasped. "Yeah. That's exactly what we'll do, like hell! Look here, somebody stole my share of the money. I had it in my

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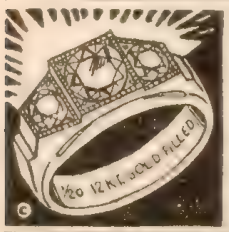

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mattress an' somebody took it. There's just five of us that knew about that money an' we're all here.

"Sherry, you've been out of town, and so has Quinn. Quinn could have cut back from the posse an' robbed me while I was out. You could have gone out to my place instead of Chaves' for all I know. Ben an' Wilsey say they haven't left town, but maybe they did. One of you four's got it an' I want it. Now!"

"Sherm," Tilton rumbled, "I don't like that. I say I ain't been out of town an' I ain't."

"I don't care whether you like it or not. Look here. I took the chances on this. You an' Quinn knocked out ol' Kimsey an' Otto, but I led them horses out from Baca's place an' I was there when Quinn killed Baca. I want my money an' I'll get it or tear things up. I'll search—"

"Go ahead and search," Sherry cut in. "You can start right here. Look through the house. It's all right with me."

A little pause. Then: "By jacks, I'll do it," Joslin declared. "I'll search the place."

Stonewall Jackson Rhodes started out from his place of concealment. He did not intend to be caught under the bed, not if he could help it. He came noiselessly to his feet. Surely by now help was on the way and surprise was the thing.

Stoney pulled Miss Minnie's Colt from his trousers and the derringer from his pocket. He moved to the door, peeked through the crack and saw three men. He swung the door open and took a step, halfway into the room.

"Hanzup!" he snapped. "Get them hands—"

A good boy, Stonewall Jackson Rhodes, and bright, too; but eagerness is not the better part of valor. He should have looked and seen five men, not three.

From beside the door, Quinn Spikesman struck at the Colt, seizing it and

wrenching down. The Colt clattered to the floor. Behind Spikesman, Price Sherry closed in. Tilton, Green and Joslin, utterly startled, wheeled to the door and reached for their weapons. Right then things were tough for Stonewall Jackson Rhodes.

He did his best to soften up the toughness. The derringer was in his left hand, an unfamiliar weapon. Stoney had never fired a derringer in all his life. He fired one now and Quinn Spikesman, reeling back from the blast in his face, clapped his hands to his head and squalled like a stepped-on cat. Spikesman had lost most of one ear, and was blinded by the muzzle blast.

The derringer blared the second barrel and, caught in the leg by a .41 caliber slug, Sherry tipped sidewards, clawed at the wall for support, and fell.

ONE gun lost, the other empty, Stoney Rhodes continued to do his best. Tilton was opposite him, lifting a gun. Stoney ducked his head and leaped. He hit Tilton in the pendulous belly and caught him around the middle. They went to the floor. In Stoney's mind was some vague idea of using Tilton as a shield.

No need. The expected reinforcements arrived. Frank Redfield, competely out of breath, and panting, pushed through the door, and behind him came Harry Delehante, Blas Vigil, the hostler, and old Lott Prine. Each of the first three held a six-shooter, and Prine carried a sawed-off shotgun.

Redfield took command. "Hold it!" he roared. "Hold it!"

Everybody froze. Joslin, his gun out, stopped in mid-motion. Green stood still, hand hidden under his coat. Tilton, the wind knocked out of him, gaped like a landed trout. Over against the wall Sherry sat, sick with the pain of his wound. Sherry was a plotter, not a fighter. Quinn

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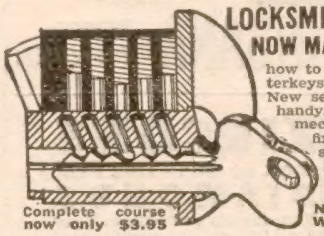

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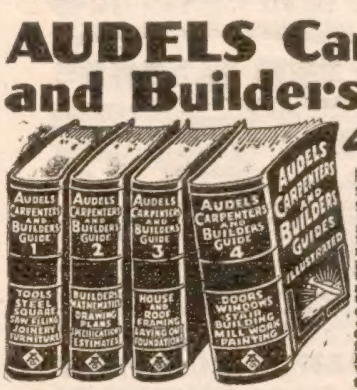
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Spikesman, right hand holding his head where once an ear had been appended, was already through. Spikesman had quit when the derringer went off.

Into the semi-quiet of the room Harry Delehante threw one word. "Gosh!" said Harry, with feeling.

Stoney Rhodes, possessing himself of Tilton's gun, scrambled to his feet.

"Get the guns off 'em!" Redfield ordered.

Blas and Lott Prine, hard citizens both, collected weapons, lining Green and Joslin up, hauling Tilton over to the wall, lifting Sherry so that his injured leg was stretched out in front of him, placing Quinn Spikesman beside the others.

The telephone rang, and Stoney stared. "I'll be damned," he said, "the match must be out."

"Answer that," the sheriff ordered. "Lott, you'd better see what you can do for Sherry's leg. He'll bleed to death if you don't stop it."

Stoney was nearest the telephone. He picked up the receiver. "Yes?" he said.

The receiver crackled.

"Yes," Stoney said. "Yes, Miss Minnie."

Now, in the room there was silence save for the voice from the receiver. No one but Stoney Rhodes could tell what was being said, but knowing Miss Minnie all knew that the voice gave orders.

"No," Stoney said finally, "nobody killed. Just Sherry an' Quinn Spikesman ran into some tough luck. . . . Yes, Miss Minnie. . . . Yes. . . . All right, just as soon as we take 'em to jail. . . . Yes. Me an' Frank. . . . All right then, *Frank and I,* will come right home."

He hung up the receiver. He stepped away from the telephone. His eyes were slightly glazed, as though from shock.

"That was Miss Minnie," said Stonewall Jackson Rhodes.

THE END

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If you are eligible to play professional baseball, merely fill out the application blank in the April Argosy, giving your baseball record. If the facts and figures you submit pass the joint Argosy-Dodger board of judges, your application will be turned over to the Dodger scouting system and you will hear directly from them.

A Dodger Contract To The Winner! Here's what the Argosy-Dodger contest means to the successful applicants. The *outstanding recruit* will receive: An expense-paid ten-day road trip with the Dodgers in a Dodger uniform; an invitation to be a guest of the Dodgers at the 1948 World Series and *A Player Contract With the Dodger Organization.*

Twenty other recruits will be invited to a special training school operated by the Dodgers, with all expenses paid.

Fans, Fathers, Coaches! You're in this contest too. Because if you are related to or know of a prospective young ball player, you can tell the Argosy board all about him. The coach and/or sand lot manager of the outstanding recruit will also get the expense-paid road trip and World Series invitation along with the prize-winning rookie.

FOR OFFICIAL ENTRY BLANK AND COMPLETE CONTEST DETAILS

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